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OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2010

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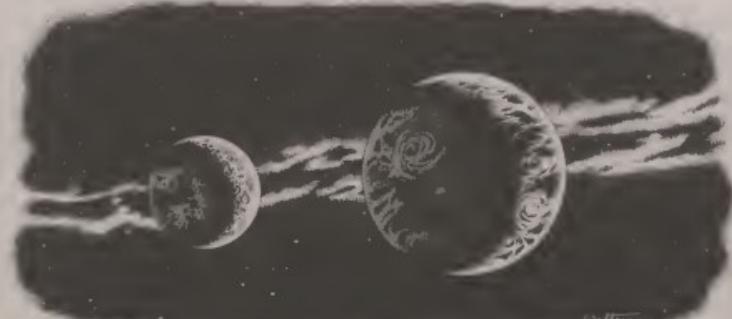
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MERMAIDS AND PINK ELEPHANTS

My first memory of Cocoa Beach is from a warm spring night in the early seventies. My family had driven to Florida along with their close friends, the Wiatrowskis. We had been promised a trip to Disney World, but, for my father and me, the highlight of the vacation was to be our visit to the Kennedy Space Center.

With nine kids between the two families, the adults must have had an enormous amount of patience. I-95 was not yet completed, so a good portion of the trip had been driven on secondary roads cluttered with cheerful billboards advertising South of the Border. We'd survived a brief visit to that well-known tourist trap, figured out the difference between the thrilling "E" and the not so exciting "A" tickets at Disney, and we kids had managed not to kill or maim each other too badly on the endless journey south from Massachusetts.

While we'd been dazzled by Frontierland and Tomorrowland at the Magic Kingdom, Cocoa Beach seemed grown up and otherworldly. In addition to the warm weather and the unfamiliar flora, the town had something of the Wild West about it. It seemed like a place that catered to young and unencumbered men. Back home in staid Springfield, bars had much earlier closing hours and the one "exotic dancer" license had to be shared among three rather seedy establishments. My father made it sound like Cocoa Beach had an endless supply of strippers and mermaids and topless clubs. Liquor could be consumed on the beach, restaurants and taverns stayed open until the wee hours, and their signage bragged of "the best breakfast on the beach," because people weren't expected to go home after an all-night bender to cook their own. You didn't even

have to partake of the bubbly to start seeing things. Besides the famous mermaids swimming in the walls of Lee Caron's Carnival, the well-known nightclub also sported a two-story pink elephant out front.

For our two families, however, the main attractions were the beautiful beaches and the Kennedy Space Center. The Visitors Center had not yet been privatized, but the tour was mesmerizing—as long as you brought your imagination along with you. Although nearly everything seemed to be "restricted," we were taken on a brief tour of the Vehicle Assembly Building—at the time, the world's largest building by volume. In the vast, apparently empty space, we were told that the building had its own weather system and that it had been known to rain inside it. Outside, we got to see some old missiles and then we were led to a building with a small room filled with portraits of famous rocket scientists. Each portrait was accompanied by a short biographical paragraph. My own obsessive fascination with science fiction seemed vindicated by the discovery that nearly all of these men attributed their inspirations and interest in their fields to reading the works of Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, and other early SF writers. Surely the modern authors would help the next wave of scientists and engineers get us off planet and into deep space.

Unfortunately, Cocoa Beach, Cape Canaveral, and the surrounding area were entering an economic downturn. President Nixon had recently proposed that a half a billion dollars be cut from the space program's budget. Four planned Apollo Moon landings had been dropped and thousands of scientists and engineers were about to be thrown out of

work. Money had been set aside for a new space shuttle program that would ferry astronauts to a large space station in Earth's orbit. This station would be the departure point for a manned mission to Mars, but since the shuttles and the station were being delayed, the *New York Times* speculated that the new timetable would "push the Mars mission into the nineteen-eighties or later."

The rules and mores of civilization seemed to arrive in Cocoa Beach during the waning days of the 1970's space program. Topless sunbathing was outlawed on the beaches in 1974 and in 1978 the pink elephant was sold to a used car dealer in Maine. My father, who had begun to develop condominium conversions in Cocoa Beach and other nearby towns, would report on the closing of one familiar bar or restaurant after another.

These thoughts resurfaced as I returned to Cocoa Beach this past May for the Nebula Awards. Although I had visited the town several times in my teens, I had stopped coming after my father's business ventures moved further south to the even more alien environment of the Florida Keys. My only intervening visit to the area had been a side trip to the Kennedy Space Center just before the 1992 WorldCon in Orlando, Florida.

This time I noticed that there had certainly been some changes. While I could scarcely catch a glimpse of the beach from the road for all the hotels and condominiums that had sprung up, the Kennedy Space Center's Visitors Center is now a spectacular tourist attraction filled with places to eat and shop and fascinating exhibits. The beach, when you walk out on to it, is as beautiful as ever and the town seems just as lively. I didn't hear of any mermaids, but I was delighted to see a smaller version of the pink elephant on a nearby miniature golf course.

I don't have room to unlock all my memories of Cocoa Beach, so I'll have to explore these and other thoughts about the Space Coast in a future editorial. O

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GHOST STORIES

I've been writing a ghost story this month. That may surprise some of you, because I haven't written a lot of ghost stories in the past. Possibly this is my first, although I don't pretend to remember every single story I've written over the past fifty-plus years.

I'm writing this one because an old friend asked me to do one for a book of them that he was editing, and while I was considering the invitation a perfectly good story idea popped into my mind. Though nobody who knows my work would ever associate me with ghost stories, I'm been fond of them as a reader ever since I discovered, around 1948, the classic Herbert Wise-Phyllis Fraser anthology *Great Tales of Terror and the Supernatural*. There is something about Victorian England that fascinates me, the fog, the hansom cabs, the Sherlock Holmes atmosphere, and many of the Wise-Fraser stories are set in that era. So I reveled in its vast array of spooky and wonderful Victorian tales by the likes of Arthur Machen, Oliver Onions, J.S. Le Fanu, and Algernon Blackwood, and, ever since, when seeking a change of pace from the robots and spaceships and time machines, I've pulled a collection of ghost stories down from the shelf for a little guilty pleasure.

I call reading the stuff a guilty pleasure because I am, at heart, a rational-minded, logical sort of guy who stopped believing in ghosts around the time I figured out the truth about the Tooth Fairy. The supernatural world has no substance for me. Spooks, haunts, phantoms, revenants—I lose no sleep in dread of them. If it can't be seen, measured, and explained, I figure, it isn't real.

That doesn't stop me, of course, from reading and even (these days) writing ghost stories with pleasure. There's a lot

that I read and write about that seems just as devoid of real-world substance as the Great God Pan. I don't believe that we're likely ever to go zipping around the past or future in time machines, but writing tales of time travel has been a specialty of mine for decades. I don't think there's much of a case for telepathy, but that did not keep me from writing *Dying Inside*. I doubt that the Earth is ever going to be invaded by beings from another star, and yet I wrote *The Alien Years*. And so forth: I'm a writer of fiction, not a journalist, and I write about all sorts of things for which I demand (from myself, and my readers) the willing suspension of disbelief.

Having said all that, I need to tell you something that will startle you as much as it does me, because it contradicts my basic view of myself as a rational being. *Although I don't believe in ghosts, I think that I live in a haunted house.*

Let me try to explain.

The house I've lived in for nearly forty years, in the hills above San Francisco Bay, is quite unusual, architecturally speaking. It was built in 1947 by an unusual architect named Carr Jones, constructed out of recycled brick, slate slabs, and huge beams left over from World War II ship construction. Everything about it is original in concept and very ingenious for its time, which means that doing any sort of maintenance on it is a nightmare. (For example, the heating system was so complex that only one living person, the stepson of the builder, understood how it worked. When he started to show signs of age, and the heating system was doing the same, I had the whole bizarre thing ripped out and replaced with a conventional set of pipes that any capable plumber would be able to work on in the years ahead.

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Born in Arkansas, raised in New Orleans, Hampton Bush has been roughneck, sailor, musician, newspaper reporter and magazine editor. Brothers of the Light is his first novel. He currently has two others in the works.

But, since I don't want to tear the entire marvelous house down and build a new one, I have to put up with the other strangenesses that the place provides.)

I am the third owner of the house. It was built for a local automobile dealer named Remmer, who after living here for about fifteen years sold it to Rollo Wheeler, an architect. He owned the place for about a decade. In 1971 Wheeler sold it to me, and I have been here ever since.

Both Remmer and Wheeler are long dead. Right after I bought the house, the Wheelers went sailing in the Gulf of California and never were seen again. (They may have been killed by Mexican pirates.) Remmer, the car dealer, died of natural causes somewhere way back. As for the car dealer's wife—well, around 1980 Rollo Wheeler's daughter, who had grown up in the house, came back to visit her childhood home and regaled me with anecdotes of the old days, one of which was the tale of Mrs. Remmer's suicide on the

premises here. I hadn't heard about that, and I wasn't particularly eager to know more, so I turned down her offer to tell me where on the grounds Mrs. Remmer's body had been found.

Then in the summer of 1981 I had the house re-roofed. The old roof was the original 1947 one and after thirty-four years it wasn't doing a good job of keeping the winter rains out. I hired someone to strip away the crumbling old shingles and brought in Doug Allinger, Carr Jones' stepson, to do a new roof in keeping with the style of the previous one.

We have two buildings here, the main house and a smaller building that is my office. The workmen dumped the shingles from the main house over the top and down into the driveway, which runs just behind the building. But the office shingles had to be removed in a two-step process: strip them off and pile them up in front of the building, and then haul them the whole length of the property to

the driveway. The first step of this job produced a great filthy heap of stripped-off old shingles about three feet high in front of the office door, completely blocking access to the building. Keep that image in mind: a knee-high stack of ancient shingles piled up against the door to the office, and a second such stack in back, where there is a second door. You should also know that I'm a passionate gardener. In Northern California's relatively benign climate I've long been experimenting with subtropical plants that are really a bit too tender even for here (since our winter temperatures do drop below freezing for brief periods every five or six years.) Back then I set up an alarm system programmed to awaken me if the outside temperature ever dropped below 32 degrees. I had some fantasy in mind, I guess, of staggering out of bed in the middle of the night to throw protective covers over the most tender plants if that alarm ever went off.

Two nights after the shingle piles had been dumped in front of my office doors, that bedroom frost alarm went off, about two in the morning. I had no idea at first of what was happening, because the alarm had never gone off since I had installed it. But eventually I figured out that that weird sound was coming from the temperature-reading gizmo on the windowsill; and then I noticed that the gizmo was telling me that the outside temperature was 28 degrees.

It was a mild August night.

Twenty-eight degrees would be unusual in my area at any time of the year. But in August it's simply impossible. The temperature alarm has malfunctioned, I decided, and went back to sleep.

In the morning I realized that I needed to get some reference item from my office that I had forgotten to bring out before the shingles were stripped. I spent a nasty half hour clearing enough of the piled-up old shingles away from the door so that I could squeeze myself inside.

As soon as I entered I smelled smoke.

Sinking feeling in chest. I have already experienced one house fire, in

1968, and I wasn't ready for another. My office was originally the cabana for the adjacent swimming pool. It is equipped with a small refrigerator and a little electric stove. I had never used either one. The refrigerator, disconnected, has served as a storage cabinet for books. I had piled more books on top of the stove.

One of the burners on the stove had been turned on.

The smoke was coming from a slowly charring book sitting on that burner. Probably it would have burst into flames in another hour or two; but I quickly turned off the stove and pulled the book away. Mind you, that burner had never been used in the nine years that this building had served as my office, and access to the office had been blocked for the past couple of days by those shingles, besides. Nor was there any sign that anyone had pushed the shingles aside to enter. Somewhere during the night, though—the same night that the frost alarm had registered a sub-freezing temperature in August—that burner had been turned on.

Had some ice-cold *thing* walked past the sensor of the temperature alarm in the night, then drifted through the wall of my office to turn the stove burner on?

When the workmen showed up that morning, I asked if anyone had had reason to enter the building the previous day. No, nobody had. (The shingle pile would have shown evidence of entry, anyway.) And when I showed Doug Allinger the book that had been burned he immediately said, "Well, it's Mrs. Remmer's ghost, isn't it?"

The book? Volume Two of *The Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology*, edited by Leslie A. Shepard.

I don't believe in ghosts, of course. I'm a rational, skeptical man. But there is a useful concept known as Occam's Razor, named for the medieval philosopher William of Occam, which says, "Do not multiply hypotheses unnecessarily"—that is, the simplest explanation for a phenomenon is probably the best one.

What Occam's Razor tells me is that it

is simpler to believe that a wandering supernatural being turned that burner on in the night than it is to believe that the burner turned itself on. Maybe the erroneous frost signal had been the result of some electronic malfunction, but the stove did not have electronic controls. Physical force had to be exerted to turn the burner on, and no one had been in my office to exert that force—except, I suppose, the malevolent ghost of Mrs. Remmer.

Would a ghost be able to turn a stove burner knob, though? I don't know. Since I don't believe in ghosts, I have no idea what they can or can't do. One would think that a spirit immaterial enough to pass through the wall of my office would be too ectoplasmic to turn that knob. But no one of this world had entered my office those two days past, and the stove had been turned on, and I can just as readily believe that my house is haunted by the ghost of Mrs. Remmer as I can that a stove can turn itself on.

Since then, all manner of odd things have happened around this house. While we were traveling one winter, the main house's roof sprang a leak during a storm and the narrow stream of water that ran down one wall just happened to descend onto the burglar-alarm keyboard, shorting it out. During another

trip, my office sink apparently turned itself on and by the time we got home and noticed that water was running there was a flood in a storage room on the floor below. We have had computer settings mysteriously change themselves, and stored e-mail mysteriously delete itself. Et cetera. Our housekeeper of some years back, going into my office to give it one of its rare cleanings, said to my wife, "I feel a presence here."

"Yes," Karen said lightly, indicating my papers strewn all around. "It's Bob." But she knew—and didn't want to say—that what the housekeeper was sensing was the presence of Mrs. Remmer.

As I say, I'm not a person who believes in ghosts. But I do use Occam's Razor as an aid to thinking, and Occam's Razor tells me that all the weird stuff that happens around here can best be explained as the work of some malign invisible spirit, and so be it. A couple of years ago, I told this story to a friend of mine, the anthropologist and artist Winfield Coleman. He is an expert on shamanism, and offered to perform a rite of exorcism for us. I turned him down. I don't believe in ghosts, I said; and in any case, I didn't want to discover that by ejecting Mrs. Remmer I had simply made room here for some even more malevolent apparition. ○



FACE THE TWEETS

ancient history

In 1996, I applied for a grant from the New England Foundation for the Arts <<http://www.nefa.org>> to attend a class for artists who wanted to create their own websites. Being a science fiction writer, I thought it wise to explore what looked to be the most important communications innovation since print. Back then some skeptics said that the World Wide Web was just a fad, like CB Radio <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citizens%27_band_radio>. They conceded the uses of email, but why would a writer need a website? What would a writer put up on it? Pictures of his cats?

The class gave me just a basic understanding of HTML <www.w3.org/MarkUp/Guide> and my first handcrafted website was a mess. Later I started using a WYSIWYG <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WYSIWYG>> editor and the thing acquired some personality. I did find stuff to put on my site, my bibliography and resume, news when I made it, some essays on writing and the writing life and later bunches of my stories.

Skip ahead a few years to the rise of the blogs. Blogger <blogger.com>, one of the very first blog-publishing tools, launched in late 1999, and was acquired by Google in 2002. The skeptics once again scoffed. Why would any sane person want to post their virtual diaries online? Who would take the time? And what would bloggers write about? Their cats?

I have to admit that even today I drift bloglessly through the blogosphere. But I breathe the blogosphere as deeply as anyone and it didn't surprise me at all that the skeptics were once again proved

wrong. For example, since 2002, Technorati has indexed 133,000,000 blogs, according to its *State of the Blogosphere 2009* <technorati.com/blogging/feature/state-of-the-blogosphere-2009>. It reports that more than three quarters of all internet users read blogs.

Many of my genre mates were early adopters <valuebasedmanagement.net/methods_rogers_innovation_adoption_curve.html>, despite the skeptics. Long-time readers of this column will recall that back in 2005, I offered up my personal list of the top 40 science fiction writers' blogs <asimovs.com/_issue_0502/onthenet.shtml>. Most of those bloggers are still busy typing. For a more objective list, nip over to 42blips <42blips.dailyradar.com/blogs>, where you can see the top two hundred science fiction and fantasy blogs. 42blips ranks using the metric of inbound links from other blogs. Here are the top five: io9 <io9.com>, Sci Fi Wire <scifiwire.com>, SF Signal <sfsignal.com>, SFWA Blog <sfwa.org/category/news>, and Film » Sci-Fi <slashfilm.com/category/movie-genres/scifi>. (This last was new to me—lively site!)

Last fall I attended a workshop about online branding for artists. The one thing that took me by surprise was when the presenter made the point that a blog was probably more important than a website for the individual artist. I know, I know a blog *is* a website. But people return again and again to a blog that is updated regularly; visiting a static website is a sometime thing. Moreover I have heard science fiction editors instruct their authors, new and old, that it's really important to start a blog, like *yesterday*.

stats

But are they right? Even as the wisdom of 2010 seems to have turned in favor of blogs, the statistics are beginning to point elsewhere. Certainly blogging is on the decline among teens and young adults, according to the **Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project** <pewinternet.org>.

"In 2006, 28 percent of teens ages 12-17 and young adults ages 18-29 were bloggers, but by 2009 the numbers had dropped to 14 percent of teens and 15 percent of young adults. During the same period, the percentage of online adults over thirty who were bloggers rose from 7 percent blogging in 2006 to 11 percent in 2009. Much of the drop in blogging among younger internet users may be attributable to changes in social network use by teens and young adults. Nearly three quarters (73 percent) of online teens and an equal number (72 percent) of young adults use social network sites. By contrast, older adults have not kept pace; some 40 percent of adults 30 and older use the social sites in the fall of 2009."

The Big Three of social networking, as I type this, are **Facebook** <facebook.com>, **Twitter** <twitter.com>, and **LinkedIn** <linkedin.com>. And again there are skeptics ready and willing to declare that social networking is nothing but a worthless time sink. Consider this, however: In March, according to **CNN** <money.cnn.com/2010/03/16/technology/facebook_most_visited/index.htm?hpt=T2>, "Facebook topped Google to become the most visited U.S. Web site last week, indicating a shift in how Americans are searching for content." The rise of Facebook has accompanied a corresponding decline for its progenitor, **MySpace** <myspace.com>. Back in December 2008, Facebook rising passed MySpace falling; the trends in either direction continue apace. Many now consign MySpace to the trash heap of internet history. Meanwhile in 2009, Twitter grew at a clogging 1,382 percent, according to **Neilson Online**

<<http://en-us.nielsen.com>>. However, data from 2010 thus far show a slight decrease in the number of unique visitors to Twitter, indicating that its initial surge of popularity has ebbed. Whether it will regain momentum remains to be seen. And then there is LinkedIn, which has about the same number of users as Twitter. It's a great network to join if you're in business, but not necessarily the place to discuss the latest issue of Asimov's.

face the tweets

Like many neophytes at social networking, I had a Facebook page long before I knew what to do with it. I couldn't wrap my mind around the concept of Friends—the coin of exchange on Facebook. I knew who my real life friends were, but what was my relationship to my Facebook friends, many of whom I had never met and probably never would meet? How did I decide which friend requests to honor and which to ignore? And if strangers could be Friends, what was appropriate to post on my Facebook page for them to read? What would be meaningful? It wasn't until I decided to treat my Facebook page as the blog I never had that things began to come clear. I would show my writerly self only to my Friends and save personal stuff for email to family and friends—small "f." And as for accepting Friend solicitations, check out the sensible policy outlined by social media blogger **Shel Israel** <redcouch.typepad.com/weblog/2007/08/my-facebook-fri.html>.

Although they share many attributes, there are two notable differences between Twitter and Facebook. The first is the famous and ironclad 140 character limit to each post, called a tweet. Some will string several tweets together to express more complex thoughts, but by and large the 140 character limit rules. The second is that Twitter is more democratic than Facebook. Instead of granting permission for people to friend you, in

Twitter you have followers. Anyone can follow you, assuming they can find you. If you want to get to know your fave SF pro better, start by consulting the list of tweeting writers at Greententacles.com <Greententacles.com/twitter>.

It used to be the case that the third major difference between Facebook and Twitter was that tweets happened in real time. This meant that Twitter was always up to date and that it was easy to have Twitter dialogues. The downside of the "now web" is that Twitter is a stream, and once a tweet floats by, it can be hard to retrieve. In 2008, Facebook tried to acquire Twitter, but when that failed it began to make itself more Twitter-like. Posts from your friends now stream by on the "News Feed" on your Facebook landing page.

It's easier, in my opinion, to understand what Facebook is for than it is to understand the power of Twitter. If you must compose a blog post, you need only consider a Facebook post, whereas you more or less blurt a tweet. Yes, they are spontaneous and often as not ungrammatical, and those who decry the corruption of language to which tweets lend themselves have a point. But it strikes me that the 140 character limit imposes a welcome succinctness on our windy culture.

I have to admit that I was a Twitter skeptic until about a year ago, and so have lagged behind in my exploration of the Twitterverse. So I put the question *Why tweet?* to my 138 followers. Three of my writer friends responded almost immediately:

C.C. Finlay <ccfinlay.com>, "Why tweet? Because social networking takes up so much of my time now I no longer have any time to blog. @ccfinlay"

Greg van Eekhout <writingandsnacks.com>, "Because I can hang out with my friends, keep up with news, and do professional networking in one window (I use Seesmic, btw). @gregvan eekhout"

Steven Gould <eatourbrains.com / steve>, "My friends are all over the country (and world.) Getting micro-slice

glimpses into their lives helps me keep in touch and while I'll talk about my work/career as stuff happens, I hate it when people flog their work endlessly on twitter. @ StevenGould" (It took Steve two tweets to say all of this.)

Reviewer and webmaster extraordinaire **Mark Watson** <bestsf.net> wrote, "Twitter complements and enhances blogging + websites, replaces rss + some forums, has drawbacks, may be a fad, but elegant simple. @BestSF"

A science fiction and fantasy fan, Molly Kalafut, added, "Why Twitter? Watching authors talk to each other is fascinating. Plus, it's my only chance to ever be quoted in Asimov's! @mollie31416" Happy to oblige, Molly!

Greg mentioned **Seesmic** <seesmic.com>, one of many Twitter clients that allow you to manage multiple social media accounts. While you can post to both Facebook and Twitter from Seesmic, there are other clients, for instance, **Tweetdeck** <tweetdeck.com>, which allow you to update Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, and LinkedIn from the same window. It occurs to me that the ultimate fate of all these social media services may be merger and/or acquisition. Should that happen your SM (unfortunate acronym, that) identity will be as commonplace as your email address.

exit

While the various iterations of social networking may come and go, there is no question in my mind that it will play a central role in the expansion of the internet into our lives. As it changes the way we communicate, it will also change the way we think and feel. What, you don't believe me? Scoff all you want, skeptics. Feel free to send your comments to my Twitter account, @jaspkelly. And don't forget the 140 character limit.

Oh, and by the way, if anyone is really interested, I'd be happy to email you pictures of Thelma and Louise, my remarkable and talented cats. O

ROADSIDE STAND

"Two-fifty, each tomato,"
says the farmer in his coveralls—
unwrinkled pull-on airtights
with polarized clear panes
around his grinning Marsborn face.
Martian pride, we call that blush:
or embarrassment, as when he says,
"That's two hundred fifty
Planetary Union dollars,
is what I mean." He stands before
his cosmic-ray-protected fields:
low and wide, steel-and-glass
acre-spanning shielded sheds. His crops
are growing just as green inside there
as do any ozone-breathing
smog-exhausted plants on asphyxiated Earth.
So he protests, anyway—this farmer
who has labored long and hard inside.
"But for you," he says,
"make it just two hundred twenty-five."



Such waste of wallet, to be buying
bright-red produce on a dull red globe.
I stand here tasting sand against my sandy tongue—
and tomato freshness, as I well recall,
will take me back—its tasty flesh
does so every time—back to youth I so well lost
I left it on another world.
Call it Earth, then—red, red Earth,
at least to lips and tongue. So costly
yet so cheap, this ripened ticket to so far away.

—Mark Rich

Kristine Kathryn Rusch's novel, *Diving Into the Wreck*, appeared to great critical acclaim from Pyr Books in November of last year. The next Diving novel, *City of Ruin*, will be out in spring of 2011. Recently, Golden Gryphon published a collection of her newest award-winning and award-nominated tales, *Recovering Apollo 8 and Other Stories*, and the website io9 declared her Retrieval Artist series one of the ten best science fiction detective stories ever published. The author's eerie new tale from her Diving universe reveals the secret of . . .

BECOMING ONE WITH THE GHOSTS

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

They landed smoothly, which surprised the hell out of Coop. The *Ivoire* had suffered more damage than he ever could have imagined, and yet the venerable old craft had gotten them here—all five hundred of them, mostly in one piece.

For a brief moment, he bowed his head. He took a deep breath and let a shudder run through him—the only emotion he'd allowed himself in more than a week. Then he raised his head and looked.

The walls had full screens, top to bottom, just like he'd ordered. It didn't matter much when the *Ivoire* transitioned, but now that the ship had arrived at Sector Base V, the walls told him a lot. A lot that he didn't understand.

The *Ivoire* had landed inside the base, just like usual. The ship stood on the repair deck, just like it was supposed to.

The base was cavernous. It had to be. Like the other ships of her class, the *Ivoire* was large. She housed five hundred people comfortably, providing family quarters, school, and recreation in addition to being a working battleship. Two ships the size of the *Ivoire* could fit into this base, with another partially assembled along the way. Not to mention the equipment, the specialized bays, the private working areas. The Sector Base was huge and impossible to process all at once.

But what Coop could process looked wrong.

For one thing, no one manned the equipment. Much of it looked like it wasn't even turned on. The lights were dim or off completely. The workstations—the ones he could see in the half-light—looked like they'd suffered minor damage. But he didn't know how they could have. Like all the Sector Bases, Sector Base V was over a mile

underground in a heavily fortified area. No one could get in or out without the proper equipment.

To his knowledge, no Sector Base had ever been attacked, not even in areas under siege. Granted, his knowledge wasn't as vast as the history of the Fleet, but he knew how difficult it was to damage a Sector Base. Although it looked like someone had harmed this one. Because it had been fine a month ago.

Before the battles with the Quurzod, he'd brought the *Ivoire* in for its final systems check and repair. He had known that he wouldn't get another full-scale repair for a year, maybe more. Particularly if the Fleet conquered the Quurzod and moved on, as planned. Then the *Ivoire* and the other ships in the Fleet wouldn't get the full-scale treatment for five years. It would take that long to build Sector Base W, at the edges of the new sector of space.

He hadn't planned on ever returning here. He certainly hadn't planned on returning here in defeat. Or what felt like defeat.

And now the base looked wrong.

"You sure we're seeing Sector Base V?" he asked his First Officer Dix Pompiano. Dix was tall and thin, almost too tall for a bridge command. Yet he could bend himself as if he were made of string, and fit into the smallest of places.

Like his command post. Dix insisted on the station farthest from Coop, in case the bridge got hit. Dix figured that if as much distance as possible separated them, one of them would survive.

Coop had always figured if the bridge got hit, the entire vessel would disappear. The *anacapa* drive—small as it was—was located on the bridge itself. If the drive took a direct hit, then the drive's protections would fail. Half the ship would be in this dimension, half in another—if they were lucky. If they weren't, the entire thing might explode.

Maybe it was the half-and-half dimensions that made Dix want to stay separate from Coop. They'd never discussed it, and they weren't about to now.

"It sure as hell doesn't look like Sector Base V," Dix said. "But the readings say it is."

"We're in the right point in space," said Anita Tren. She stood at her post, even though her built-in chair brushed against her backside. She was small, so small that she had to boost herself into that chair. On good days, she would kid that she needed to stand so that she could be closer to her board.

"Have you confirmed that we're under Venice City?" Coop asked.

Venice City, the latest settlement. "Latest" was technically accurate, but the location, on the most remote planet in this sector, had been settled fifty years before Coop was born. At his first visit here, on his tenth birthday, he had thought the city old.

His father had laughed at that, telling Coop there were places in this sector that had been colonized for thousands of years. Human habitation, his father said, although no one knew where those humans had originated.

The Fleet, everyone knew, originally came from Earth, but so long ago that no one alive had seen the home planet or even the home solar system. Earth was as much a myth as the Fleet itself, something rare and special and lost to time.

As a young man, Coop had toyed with the idea of going back there. He thought of building a ship, begging, borrowing (hell, stealing) an *anacapa* drive, and plotting the trip back.

But ultimately, he feared disappointment. He'd seen too many legendary parts of space already and they rarely lived up to their advance billing. He liked the Earth of his imagination. He didn't want to see anyone or anything spoil it.

Like they had spoiled Venice City. When he'd heard that the settlement was named for an old Earth city that had disappeared into the ocean—an ancient city of canals and tall stone buildings—he had expected the same there.

Instead, he found a haphazard collection of buildings perched in a dry valley, one that got so hot in its summer that he thought he would die. Later, his father had explained to a disappointed Coop that the name had come from a joke, a conversation among the settlement's inhabitants as the place took shape.

What's the official name going to be?

Not Death Valley. Names can be prophetic.

Hell, then we probably should call it Venice City. Maybe an ocean will find us then. Coop never found that funny. Just like he didn't find this funny.

The base looked dimmer than usual. The equipment seemed smaller in the emptiness. Some lights were on, but not many. And the bulk of the base disappeared into the darkness.

"Is something wrong with the screens then?" Coop asked Yash Zerlengo, his onsite engineer.

She had left her station. She had walked up to the nearest wall screen and was investigating it with her handheld, as well as with the fingertips of her left hand.

She was Coop's height, broad shouldered, a former athlete raised planetside, which was unusual in the Fleet. But she had her family's knack for technology. She knew how to repair anything, how to build most things, and seemed to have a sixth sense about anything technical.

"I'm not reading any problems. These images are coming from the ship's exterior just like they should be," she said.

Coop frowned and wished, not for the first time, that the original Fleet engineers had thought it proper to build portals into the bridge. He would like to do a visual comparison of what he saw on the wall screens with what he saw out the portal.

But he would have to leave the bridge to do that.

So he snapped his finger at the most junior officer on deck, Kjersti Perkins. She didn't even have to be told what he wanted. She nodded and exited.

Perkins would have to walk three-tenths of a mile just to get to the nearest portal. The bridge was in the nose of the ship, completely protected by hull. The original engineers had thought portals were for tourists, and didn't insert any until the ship widened into its residential and business wings.

But Coop couldn't just worry about what was outside the ship. He also had to worry about what was inside the ship. "Give me updated damage reports," he said.

"Nothing new," Yash said, which was a relief. Coop had been expecting more damage all over the ship. Normal activation of the *anacapa* drive often revealed weak spots in the ship, and this activation had been anything but normal. It had been desperate—more desperate than he ever wanted to admit.

Fifteen days of drift—full engine failure, at least on the standard engines. The *anacapa* worked—it had gotten them there, after all, wherever there was, which none of them could exactly figure out. It seemed like they'd moved dimensions, just like they were supposed to, but something had gone wrong with the navigation equipment, confirmed by scans.

An asteroid field where there shouldn't be one. A star in the proper position, but not at the proper intensity. A planet with two moons instead of the expected three.

Nothing was quite right, and yet a lot was. Coop didn't even want to think about the possibilities. He didn't dare.

Back when he realized they were drifting, Coop had set up the distress beacon, the one tied to the *anacapa*, so that it could reach any nearby bases, and prayed for an answer. Which hadn't come.

So he increased the scans. The *Ivoire* couldn't move yet—not with a regular drive, anyway, although repairs were coming along, as the engineers said—but everything else seemed to be working.

They should have gotten a response from two different bases: Sector Base V and Sector Base U, which was at the very edge of their range. Not to mention Starbase Kappa, which—according to the records—wasn't that far from here.

Nothing. He'd left the signal on, but checked it and asked the science whiz kids in the school wing to work the design for a new signal, something a little less formal, he said, and he told their teacher what he really wanted was for them to build a new signal from scratch.

Just in case the old one had been damaged in the fight with the Quurzod, and somehow that damage hadn't registered. He couldn't spare the engineers to do the work. He needed the students more than he ever had before.

He didn't tell the teacher that, but she had clearly figured it out. She looked grimly determined, and told him the kids would get on the project right away.

They were only half done when Dix caught the edge of a reply.

Automated from Sector Base V: We have heard your distress signal. We are prepared to use our own drive to bring you to us. If that is what you need, turn on your anacapa drive now.

Without a second thought, Coop turned on the drive, and the *Ivoire* whisked out of the drift, their drive piggybacking on Sector Base V's.

He'd studied the process in school and hadn't entirely understood it. Just that something about the two drives linked, locked, and provided extra power, power that could bring a damaged ship from wherever it was to wherever it needed to be.

The *Ivoire*'s journey had taken half a minute, maybe less. They had been drifting in an unknown part of space, then they were here, in Sector Base V, beneath the mountains that towered over Venice City. They were here and they should have been safe. But they weren't.

Coop had a sense they were in deeper shit than they'd ever been in before.

Perkins returned quicker than Coop expected. She must have scurried down those corridors.

"It's the same," she said, somewhat breathlessly. "The view's the same."

He had expected that, and yet hoped for a different outcome. Dix bent over his console. So did Tren. They checked their readings again, probably for the fifteenth or sixteenth time.

Coop took a deep breath. He didn't need the repeated readings. The equipment said they were in Sector Base V, so they had to be in Sector Base V. A different Sector Base V than the one he had left a month ago.

He ran a hand over his face. The *anacapa* created a fold in space. The Fleet used it as both a drive and a cloak, although cloak wasn't the accurate term. If a ship was under fire, it activated its *anacapa* drive, moving into foldspace, and then returning to the same point in regular space moments or hours later. Sometimes moments were all it took to confuse the enemy ships. Sometimes hours got the ship—and the Fleet—out of a serious dilemma.

That was how the ships continued to travel through hundreds of years. They rarely got damaged in battle, and when they did, they could go elsewhere to repair. The Fleet had learned long ago how to do extensive repair in space, but they had also learned that sometimes parts simply wore out. Repair could only do so much, particularly when spread over hundreds of years, thousands of battles, and countless trips via the *anacapa* drive.

That was why the Fleet built settlements on hospitable planets, usually choosing a mountainous region, always picking a hard to reach (by ground) location far from the main civilizations (if there were any). The settlements were mostly underground and never considered permanent.

Sector Base N, for example, had been abandoned for nearly four hundred years. No one from the Fleet went back to that sector, so they didn't need the base.

On every settlement, though, a handful of people chose to stay. Some married into the indigenous population. Some simply liked life planetside better than life in space, although Coop never understood why.

As a kid, he thought about all those lost bases, like he thought about the nearly mythical Earth, and wondered what it would be like to return to them.

His father kidded him, saying Coop was the only child whose adventurous spirit turned backward instead of forward.

Coop let his hand drop away from his face. Then he looked at the wall screens again.

"It doesn't make sense," he muttered.

The others were watching him. He wasn't sure how many of them knew what he was thinking.

And he wasn't exactly sure what he was thinking. Had someone left the base's *anacapa* drive active, even though the base had been under attack? That didn't make sense, because every commander—on base and on ship—was instructed to shut off an *anacapa* drive before enemy capture.

Shut off, or destroy.

Even though the Fleet had traveled all over the known universe, it had never encountered another civilization with an *anacapa* drive. They had encountered other marvelous technology, but never anything as sophisticated and freeing as the *anacapa*.

Without the *anacapa*, the Fleet could never have continued on its extensive mission. Without the *anacapa*, the Fleet would never have left its own small sector of space around Earth. The *anacapa* had enabled it to travel great distances, carrying its own brand of justice and its own kind of integrity to worlds far and wide.

Had the *anacapa* drive here in Sector Base V malfunctioned, forcing everyone to leave? He'd heard of malfunctioning drives before. They were one of the most dangerous parts of the Fleet. A ship with a malfunctioning drive sometimes had to be destroyed to protect the Fleet and anything around it.

But that made no sense either. Because the *anacapa* drive inside all the sector bases was tied to working equipment. Not just working equipment, but equipment that had been turned on and used manually by a human being within the past twenty-four hours.

It was a failsafe, designed by some far-seeing engineer, or, as Coop's father would have said, designed by a professional worrier, someone who tried to see all the problems and plan for them.

The failsafe had been designed to prevent exactly this kind of problem: A ship could get trapped planetside. Crews would be trapped inside a mountain, especially if the internal corridors had collapsed, and there was no real way out.

The human failsafe was necessary because no one knew—even now, after generations of using the drives—how long an *anacapa* could survive without maintenance. There were some in the Fleet who believed that an *anacapa* drive would remain functional long after the human race had disappeared from the universe.

The human race hadn't disappeared. The *anacapa* drive still worked. But something had happened in the repair area. Something bad.

"Should we go out there, see what went wrong?" Perkins asked.

No one answered her. She specialized in communication. She spoke fifteen languages fluently, another forty haphazardly, and had a gift for picking up new languages all the time. Combined with the computer database on languages all over the known universe, and her ability to recognize patterns, Perkins was one of the most formidable linguists in the Fleet, and Coop's secret weapon whenever they went anywhere new.

But so far, except for the disaster with the Quurzod—which wasn't her fault—she had never been on a mission where something had gone wrong.

"We can't go out there yet," Coop said. "We need to know what we're facing."

He didn't want to tell her that if the *anacapa* had malfunctioned, the area outside the ship might be deadly to the team. Not obviously deadly—they wouldn't die the moment they walked out there.

There were ways to test this, but he would actually have to look them up. No one had encountered this sort of thing in living memory, and the training for it had slipped, although the warnings had remained.

"You think the base was attacked?" Dix asked.

"Possible," Coop said. He didn't want to reveal his suspicions any more than that. He wanted the bridge crew to explore all options. "Let's figure out what's going on here before we make any moves."

"Sir?" Yash sounded strange.

He glanced at her.

She was pointing at an area on the wall screen. A woman walked toward the ship's exterior. The woman was thin and wore a form-fitting environmental suit of a type Coop had never seen before. She had cylinders and what looked like a knife hilt attached to the belt on her hip.

He could only get a glimpse of her angular face through her helmet.

As he watched, she reached out and put her gloved hand on the *Ivoire*'s side.

"Is she the one who attacked us?" Perkins asked.

"We don't know if the base was attacked," Coop said.

"But it's been abandoned," Perkins said.

"There could be a variety of reasons for that." This time, Dix answered her. But he didn't elaborate and neither did Coop.

But Perkins wasn't dumb. Just inexperienced. "So is that woman part of a repair crew?"

"I don't think so," Yash said. "I don't recognize her suit."

"It could be special hazmat suits from Venice City itself," Tren said.

Perkins eyes opened wider. "Hazmat? So it's toxic out there?"

Coop shrugged. "We don't know anything yet. All we know is that we're here, nothing is as it was when we left, and a woman is in the repair room. We don't even know if it's a woman we've met before. I can't see her face clearly, can you?"

"No," Dix said.

"But she's human, right?" Perkins asked.

"What else would she be?" Yash asked with a touch of impatience. The Fleet, in all its travels, had never discovered an alien race, not as the Fleet defined it, anyway, which was a non-standard, unexpected life form of equal intelligence to humans.

"I don't know," Perkins said. "That woman looks weird."

Perkins' voice held an edge of panic. She'd felt responsible for the Quurzod disaster, even though the fault didn't lie with the linguists, but with the Quurzod themselves (intransigent bastards). She had held up well during the fifteen days in that unrecognizable area of space, but she must have been clinging to the thought that everything would be fine when they reached Sector Base V. And now everything wasn't fine. It was enough to break a more experienced officer.

"When was the last time you slept, Kjersti?" Coop asked.

She looked at him sideways, understanding in her eyes. She knew that he had caught the beginnings of panic in her voice, knew that he was about to send her to her quarters. "I'm fine," she said.

"Go rest," he said.

"Sir—"

"Kjersti," he said. "Go rest."

She straightened, recognizing the order. "Whom should I send to replace me?"

"No one," he said. "Not just yet. I'll send for you if we need anything."

She nodded, thanked him, and left the bridge.

The others watched, knowing they were as tired, as worried, and maybe even as panicked. They just had more experience and knew how to push the emotions away.

"Are we getting any readings on the environment out there?" Coop asked. "Any idea at all why that woman is in an environmental suit?"

"Everything reads normal," Yash said.

"But that stuff floating around her," Tren said. "What's that?"

Coop didn't see floating material. The entire repair room looked dim to him. Clearly Tren saw something. But she was closer to the wall screen.

"Maybe that's the hazardous material," Dix said.

"We don't know if it's hazardous out there," Coop said. "Perhaps the suit is just an excess of caution."

"Why would she be cautious about a base underneath a mountain?" Dix asked.

"Tunnel collapse?" Tren said.

"Sometimes planets themselves create a hazardous environment. When they built Sector Base S, they encountered a series of methane pockets," Yash said.

Everyone looked at her.

She shrugged.

"We had to study base building in training," she said. "Sector Base S is a cautionary tale. We actually learned how to build without exposing anyone to underground surprises."

"They weren't building anything here," Coop said.

"But a groundquake, a volcanic eruption, an explosion on the surface might hurt the integrity underground and cause something like Sector Base S encountered," Yash said.

"Wouldn't methane show up in the readings?" Tren asked.

"I'm not trusting anything we're getting right now," Yash said. "Some of the damage the *Ivoire* suffered is pretty subtle. We've only been focused on the major stuff. Once we look at everything, we might discover that some of the things we think are minor are more serious than we initially thought."

Coop had a hunch all of the damage on the *Ivoire* was major. He had been operating on that principle from the beginning. He had been relieved when the trip through foldspace to here hadn't completely destroyed the ship.

"Any way to hail that woman?" Dix asked.

Coop had just let his linguist go. He wasn't going to try to contact strangers without a linguist on deck.

"See what readings you can get off the base's equipment," he said to Yash.

"I'll do what I can," she said. "A lot of the equipment is still inactive."

"Inactive?" Coop said, startled. "Shouldn't it be dormant?"

That was the customary thing to do in leaving a base. If the area was safe enough to leave the *anacapa* drive functional, then the equipment around it needed to function as well. It had to remain dormant so that the touch of a human being could bring the equipment up on a moment's notice.

So, theoretically, could the arrival of a ship that traveled to the base on a piggy-backed *anacapa* merge.

"Yes, it should be dormant," Yash said. "But these things were shut off."

"And the *anacapa* remained functional?"

She opened her hands in a how-should-I-know gesture. "Right now, nothing's working like it should."

"Is that because of a malfunction in the *Ivoire*?"

"Honestly, Coop," she said, dispensing with the "sir" now that Perkins was gone, "I have no idea. I won't know until I get out there and investigate."

He looked at the wall screen. "None of us is going out there until we know who these people are and what the hell's going on."

"How do you propose we find that out, then?" Dix asked.

"We be patient," Coop said.

"There could be an immediate threat," Dix said.

"There could be," Coop said. "But right now, we're getting no indication of that."

"Except an empty base, a stranger in the repair room, and malfunctioning equipment," Dix said.

"We waited fifteen days to get here," Coop said, "with a crippled ship and no answers to our distress calls. We were patient. We got here."

"Where things aren't good," Dix said.

"They're better than they were," Coop said. "We're not in an unidentified part of space. In that room, there are things that will help us repair this ship. If we're patient, we'll be able to fix the *Ivoire* and catch the Fleet."

"If that woman doesn't attack us," Tren said.

Coop gave her a sideways look. She wasn't speaking out of panic. She was just throwing out a possibility.

"One woman? Who happens to be carrying a knife? What do you think she'll do, Anita, stab the *Ivoire* to death?"

He hadn't meant to be that sarcastic. He was tired, too. And a bit worried about what he was seeing here. But no longer worried that the five hundred people in his charge would die on the ship.

They would survive. He knew that much now. But whether or not they would die under Venice City was another matter. He was going to take this slowly, no matter what his crew wanted.

"How are our weapons systems?" he asked Yash. He hadn't had cause to ask since they'd activated the *anacapa* to get away from the Quurzod. Nothing had approached them for fifteen days.

"We've repaired some of them," Yash said, "but nothing we can fire down here."

"Why not?" Coop asked.

"Because the walls are made of nanobits just like the hull of the *Ivoire*," she said. The Fleet's technology was nanobased, with the help of the *anacapa* drive. The drive powered the technological change on a planet, essentially powering the nanobots that sculpted the interiors of mountains into the best bases he'd ever found in the known universe. "The shots will bounce off. They'll ricochet until the energy is spent."

"Damaging nothing," Coop said.

"Except the equipment," Yash said, "and anyone who happens to be in the repair room."

"Exactly," he said.

"But these weapons weren't meant to be fired in atmosphere," she said. "If there's a methane leak, for example, then we might have another kind of explosion."

"Or an *anacapa* malfunction," Dix said.

"The weapons won't cause an *anacapa* malfunction," Yash said.

"I know," Dix said. "I meant if their *anacapa* has malfunctioned...."

"It hasn't," Coop said. "It got us here."

Yash gave him a sideways look. He knew that look. It was one that cautioned him to silence. The two of them had served together since they were cadets, and they had bolstered each other from the beginning.

"You disagree," he said to her.

"Even a malfunctioning *anacapa* could have had enough energy to get us here," she said.

"Great," he said. "So we're back to square one. We won't know anything until we get out there and take some readings. And we're not going to do that as long as those outsiders are here."

He walked over to that part of the wall screen and peered at the woman. She was still touching the *Ivoire*'s exterior, as if she could gather information about the ship through the palm of her glove.

For all he knew, she could.

Her face was barely visible inside the helmet. He couldn't really make out her features, but he thought she looked intrigued. As if she hadn't expected the *Ivoire*. Maybe she hadn't. Maybe she knew the Fleet was long gone.

She tilted her head. It felt like she could see him.

But he knew that wasn't true. She couldn't see him at all. She probably didn't even know he was there.

"What's she doing?" Tren asked.

Coop shook his head. He had a theory—he always had theories, and he'd learned it was never wise to share them, at least not when he led a mission. Always better to gather information.

Behind the woman, he saw movement. Four others, huddled near the exterior door, nearly lost in the gloom.

Only it wasn't really gloom. She was teaching him that. Particles floated in the air around her. They were coating the exterior of the ship, which was probably why the base looked so damn dark. Apparently he was finally able to see the stuff that Tren had been referring to.

"There's some kind of substance on the exterior of the ship," he said. "Look at her hand. It's clearer than everything else."

Her gloved hand. She had placed her palm flat against the ship. The glove was white, so tight that he could see the ridges in her palm, the bend of her fingers.

She knew nothing about the vessel. None of the outsiders did. From the way they huddled, they seemed frightened by it.

Of course, he was guessing. But they were human, and their body language wasn't aggressive. It was protective.

"Do you have a visual of our arrival?" he asked Dix.

"I'm sure we do," Dix said.

"Let's see it. Center screen."

Dix floated his fingers over his console. It took a moment, but the screen in the center of the bridge went dark, replaced by the shimmer created by the *anacapa* whenever a ship was about to arrive at its destination.

The shimmer looked silver, then slowly resolved into an image of the repair area's interior. The equipment, looking just as odd, the screens over the command consoles, showing what the ship was seeing just as they'd been programmed to do. Redundant imagery at the moment, but useful most of the time. The repair crew could look and see what a ship saw as it traveled to the base. Sometimes they could even figure out where the damage was from looking at the feed.

So the screens were working, which he hadn't noticed after they'd arrived. Then he looked at the floor itself. It had yellow lines, outlining the landing area, and *Danger!* written all across the face, so that no one would accidentally step on the pad. Sometimes the repair crew didn't know when a ship was going to arrive. A vessel's *anacapa* drive could shut off and the vessel would appear on the landing platform, not realizing that the ship had just appeared where a human being had been standing.

Someone had been standing there in the feed. Someone wearing an environmental suit similar to the woman's.

Similar, but not the same:

So this wasn't a military team then. Private? They didn't have matching suits.

The person—a man, Coop guessed just from his general shape—whirled as if in response to someone calling his name. The man hesitated for just a moment—and then he sprinted off the platform, diving toward the main door just as the ship settled.

Coop could barely make out the five people, huddled against the door. All of their helmeted faces were turned toward the ship, but none of the people moved. At the moment, Coop felt relief. While he had been trying to figure out where he was and what had happened, they had been trying to figure out what they were seeing.

Eventually, they must have determined that it was safe enough to approach the ship.

"Thanks," Coop said to Dix. "That answered a lot of questions."

And created a whole hell of a lot more.

The woman stood outside the ship for a very long time. The particles swirled around her, but she ignored them as if she expected them or was used to them. Coop watched her as she touched the side of his ship, as she beckoned the others to join her.

One of them, a different man than the one who had nearly been crushed by the *Ivoire*, found the ship's main exterior door. The outsiders gathered around it, clearly discussing what to do next.

Coop let them. They couldn't get in, not without codes and approvals. Or very powerful weapons. And none of the five seemed to have weapons, aside from the woman's knife.

"Can you get any readings on the atmosphere inside the repair room?" he asked Yash.

"From what I can tell," she said, "the air seems fine. It seems to be recycling from the outside, just like it was designed to do. But I don't trust the reading."

"Because of the environmental suits," he said.

She shook her head. "Because of the particles. Those things are large, and if they get into lungs, they might do some damage, depending on what they are."

"Are the particles coming in from outside?" Coop asked.

"Doesn't seem that way." Dix was bent over his console. He'd been replaying the entry imagery—Coop had seen some of it as he had walked past Dix's station. "We're coated with those particles and we didn't bring them with us. So they're inside the base."

"We need to get that stuff off the ship," Yash said. "We don't know what it is and whether or not it's doing additional damage."

"We can't do anything as long as those people are so close," Coop said. He didn't want to accidentally kill the outsiders.

"How do we move them?" Dix asked.

"We don't," Coop said. "They're wearing environmental suits. That gives them some kind of time limit. Their oxygen won't last forever."

"What if they're just using some kind of filtration system?" Tren asked.

"Not likely," Yash said. "The woman has cylinders on her hips. Those looked like extra oxygen to me."

"You're guessing," Tren said.

"It's an educated guess," Yash snapped.

Coop glared at both of them. Nerves were getting frayed. He was going to have to relieve this crew relatively soon, even if they didn't know exactly what was going on.

"What kind of readings are you getting from the particles?" he asked Yash.

"Nothing definitive," she said. "But I'm not sure how well the ship's exterior sensors are working."

"Test the exterior sensors on the woman's glove," he said. "Tell me what it's made of."

Yash nodded. Coop moved closer to the woman's image, as close as he could get without pressing his nose against the wall.

"I don't recognize the material," Yash said, "although that's not unusual. It's composed of..."

She listed a series of ingredients, talked about how they combined into some kind of microfiber that had incredible tensile strength, and went on in great detail about how effective such material would be in an environmental suit.

Coop paid only the smallest amount of attention, enough to absorb the important information, but lose all of the details. The upshot, as he understood it, was simple. The environmental suit, while thin, would work in space and be quite effective on short trips. But the suits on the *Ivoire* were vastly superior.

Yash concluded with, "If that suit's indicative of this culture, then these people are technologically inferior to us."

Which meant that they were far behind developmentally—at least, that would be how the Fleet's playbook called it. Coop didn't always agree with that. In some senses, the Fleet was far behind everyone else. The Fleet was operating on technology built by generations many years in the past. Yes, the engineers knew how to maintain the technology and how to replicate it, but they hadn't really developed anything new. At least, not on their own.

They had developed additions to the Fleet based on technology they'd discovered as they'd traveled through the stars.

"You can tell all that about the suit," he said to Yash, "but you can't tell me anything about the particles."

"I can't tell you why those people are afraid of them," Yash said. "They seem like flakes off the equipment in the repair room or maybe some nanobits floating free."

"What would cause nanobits to float free?" Tren asked.

"Serious damage to the base," Dix said.

"Or some kind of decay," Yash said. "Something that made the bits' bonding fail."

"Some kind of microscopic weapon?" Coop asked.

"I don't know," Yash said. "I'm going to have to test with actual particles."

"So we're going to need some samples," Coop said. "Since these folks don't believe that the particles will hurt their environmental suits, we can assume our vastly superior suits will do just fine out there."

"You don't want to use one of the small probes, then?" Dix asked. Clearly that was what he had expected, probably what he would have ordered, if he had been left in charge.

"I want a quick grab," Coop said, "maybe an airlock test for particulate toxicity, and then I want to explore that room."

More importantly, he wanted to check the equipment, see the records, figure out what the hell happened here.

"So what are we going to do?" Yash asked. "Are we going to go out there and introduce ourselves to these people?"

Coop shook his head. "They probably don't even know we're here—"

"Don't know we're here?" Tren said. "C'mon, Coop. That woman's been exploring the surface of the ship. She clearly knows we're here."

"She knows the *ship* is here," Coop said. "She doesn't know that we're in it."

"She'd think this thing is automated?" Tren asked.

"Why not?" Coop asked. "The base looks abandoned. That group of five people probably activated the beacon that brought us here. Face it, Anita, if we were all dead,

the ship would have come without our guidance. It's designed that way. We turn on the beacon and the *anacapas* do the rest."

It was another aspect of the failsafe mechanism. If the crew was in any way incapacitated, the ship would come here and, if they were lucky, someone would be here to help.

"You're making a lot of assumptions," Dix said.

"I certainly am," Coop said. "That's why I want some certainty. The sooner we can get out of here and explore that repair room, the happier I'll be."

"But you don't want to meet those people," Yash said.

"We're going to wait until they leave," Coop said.

"And if another crew comes in after them?" Dix asked.

"We'll analyze the situation then," Coop said. "We have no other choice."

It took another hour for the outsiders to leave. Four of them spent some time crowded around the *Ivoire*'s main exterior door, probably discussing how to open it. The woman walked around part of the ship, touching it, and peering closely at any change in the hull. The ship was much too large for her to go all the way around.

She was clearly examining it, and for all the bridge crew could tell, she was probably running some kind of diagnostic on it as well.

Finally, one of the others broke away from the group and loped toward the woman. She shook her head, as if participating in a conversation, and then the other person—one of the men—finally reached her side. He took her arm, gently but firmly.

She shook him off and moved away.

He took her arm again, and this time, she sighed visibly, and walked with him around the side of the ship. They joined the others, and together the group left through the door that led to the corridor.

"Maybe we should lock it," Dix said.

"Because that wouldn't be noticed." That was the second time Coop had used sarcasm. He was as tired as the crew. He sighed. "Send that tester through the airlock."

Yash nodded. She had chosen a team of scientists to capture the particles, but the scientists would be monitored by the engineering staff—by Yash, really.

None of the bridge crew had gone down to the main exterior doors. Coop wanted the crew to remain on the bridge in case something went wrong. He even insisted that a junior member of the science team take the particle sample. Only two people, wearing their own environmental suits, would be in the airlock. They would take the particulate matter using some method that he didn't entirely understand, and then they would bring it back inside.

Coop wanted them to open the exterior door, scoop up some particles, close the doors, and get the hell out of the airlock.

Dix protested. He felt they should take advantage of the outsiders' absence to explore the room.

Coop shook his head. First off, exploring the room was the wrong phrase. It was a cavern, impossible to explore all at once. Besides, they'd all been in that area a dozen times before. They needed information, and they were going to collect it slowly. He thought it fascinating that he wasn't the only member of the bridge crew who believed the outsiders would be back.

He wondered how long those suits needed to be replenished. He also wondered if the team's leader was reckless. If the leader was, the same team would be back within the hour. If the leader wasn't, either a new team would enter soon, or the other team would wait some designated amount of time, maybe a full day, before returning.

Coop was going to try to get as much as possible done in the time that he had.

He didn't monitor the airlock experiment. He had Yash do that from the bridge. It

only took a few minutes. Some of the particles got into the airlock itself, and Coop asked that they be captured instead of expelled.

"We got everything," Yash said. "It looks like it's safe to go out there."

"Do the extensive tests," Coop said. He wanted to go out into the cavern as much as the others, but he had learned about caution the hard way. It was always better to take precautions.

"I'd like to go monitor the experiments," Yash said.

"No," Coop said. "I need you here."

"What for?" she asked. "Standing around waiting?"

He shook his head. "I was thinking we could scrub the particles off the ship's exterior now that the outsiders are gone. You think it's safe to do that?"

Yash shrugged. "The preliminary tests came back that the substance is harmless. Essentially, the particles are the same material as the walls, so far as we can tell. I think it's a bit of a gamble to scrub the ship, but not a major one."

"Scrub it," Coop said.

Yash entered the commands. At least that part of the ship was working. It scaled the particulate matter off its hull in a matter of seconds. More particles floated through the air, but the image on the screens was clearer than it had been just a moment ago.

The repair area was still dim. The lights had faded from their normal brightness to something that looked weak and grayish. Maybe that had something to do with particulate cover on the lights themselves. Coop couldn't know that without a clearer view.

As the particulate matter settled down, he noted that the equipment closest to the exits appeared to be running. He could see lights and some of the screens above the control panels. But as he looked farther into the distance, farther away from the main door, he couldn't see anything. The depths of the repair room seemed particularly dark.

"I still can't get the systems to talk to each other, Coop," Yash said. "I don't think the problem is on our end. I seem to be making an exterior request, but nothing is coming back at us."

He nodded, then folded his hands behind his back. He was going to have no choice, then. Someone was going to have to venture into that room.

A second outsider team didn't come in the doors, at least not immediately. The room remained silent.

The bridge crew had been working nearly twenty-four hours straight. They all needed rest. The ship was here, something was going on, and Coop couldn't solve the puzzles instantly.

He ordered the bridge crew to take ten hours, but he also ordered them to leave their comm links open. If something went wrong, he wanted this team back on the bridge with just a few minutes' notice.

He put Lynda Rooney, his second officer, in charge. She was a big-boned woman, raised planetside like Yash, but with more experience on a bridge than Coop had. A screw-up early on in her career had derailed her upward climb for nearly ten years, but she was back on track now, and he was happy to have her on his team.

He also installed the second most competent team that he had on the bridge itself. He made sure Lynda knew that no one was to leave the ship or contact the outsiders if (when) they returned. He wanted to know the exact moment that the outsiders came back, and he wanted their every movement recorded. He didn't want to be awakened unless the outsiders did something truly unexpected like attack the ship or try to destroy the equipment. He also wanted to know how long the outsiders re-

mained in the room. He needed to know the length of their shift, so that he could adjust the length of his.

Lynda understood all of this. She also knew exactly what he was doing with the experiments, and she promised to monitor the repair work that continued on the interior of the ship.

Both Coop and Lynda knew the repair work would go slower than planned, now that it was clear that they weren't going to get help from the base. But that didn't stop the work from proceeding.

Coop needed it done. If those outsiders were hostile, if something had destroyed this base and threatened his ship, he needed to know. They had to be prepared to leave quickly.

"And go where?" Lynda asked him softly as he was about to leave the bridge. She was a bit more anal retentive than he was. If the ship had to leave quickly, he'd figure out where at the time. If the ship was repaired, he could catch the Fleet but he had to know where the Fleet would be.

The Fleet always traveled on the same trajectory. The problem was that the Fleet's mission determined its timetable. The Fleet's mission, which it had adhered to without fail since leaving Earth, was to support the underdog, fight the right battles, help individuals, nations, and entire regions of space become self sufficient, able to protect their own peoples without hurting others.

The mission was vague, and sometimes the Fleet ended up on a side it didn't want to be on, but mostly, it had worked. And when the Fleet felt the peoples, the nations, the regions of space were stable, it moved on, secure in the knowledge that it had done its job well.

Sometimes, to do that job well, the Fleet had to stay longer than expected. Sometimes on a random stop for supplies, the Fleet would encounter a group that needed their help. Sometimes, no one they met needed help, not for years.

So the Fleet's location along its chosen route would be a suggestion, a hope, rather than an actual schedule. And the stragglers could catch up, because the *anacapa* worked by folding space and could, with the right calculations, fold the *Ivoire* within a few years (and a few light-years) from the Fleet itself.

If the *anacapa* worked. If the *Ivoire* retained enough power to travel that far. If they didn't get attacked by those outsiders. If, if, if. The ifs threatened to overwhelm him. That sensation was a familiar one to him. It came when he lacked sleep. So he left the bridge, went to his quarters, and slept.

The sleep helped. When Coop returned to the bridge, he was calm, ready to work, and filled with ideas. He wasn't quite filled with hope, but he knew that his resolution was the next best thing.

Lynda greeted him tiredly. "They've been back an hour," she said. "It looks like the same group."

He peered at the screens. He only saw the woman, waving her arm at something, particles swirling around her. But it looked like she was gesturing at someone.

At several someones, actually. The rest of the outsiders. If the same group returned, then that might have been the entire team. In fact, it probably was the entire team.

This was welcome news. It meant that he only had to compete with one team for time inside the former repair room.

"They came back exactly eighteen hours after they'd left," Lynda said.

Coop would wager that they would leave six hours after they'd arrived. Obviously, their suits couldn't handle much more than that, and they had no back-up team, and, most likely, no back-up suits.

More good news.

He looked at the wall screens. Two of the outsiders were running what appeared to be handheld computers over the built-in equipment. Two more were going deeper into the repair room itself.

And the woman he had seen the day before, along with one other person—a man (the one who had run from the spot where the *Ivoire* now rested?)—were going over the ship, inch by inch.

Coop wondered what they hoped to find.

He wondered what they thought of all they had seen.

He wondered who they were.

"Are they going to do any kind of damage to that equipment?" he asked Zaria Diaz, this shift's on-deck engineer. Diaz was a tiny dark-haired woman who often spent her time inside the machinery. She was one of the few crew members who could fit into some of the crawlspaces.

"They shouldn't damage the equipment," Diaz said, "so long as they only run their own equipment over it and don't touch anything."

"And if they touch it?" he asked.

"I think that's what turned the equipment back on in the first place."

"Turned it back on?" he asked.

She nodded. "I think this entire room had been shut down."

Coop folded his hands behind his back and faced Diaz. "You're still working on assumptions, though, aren't you?"

"I don't have any proof of anything," she said. "I tried all night to get our equipment to talk with the base equipment. I don't think it's going to happen without someone venturing into that mess and seeing what they find."

He nodded. He agreed.

His bridge crew was filing back on. He dismissed Rooney's bridge crew, then set up a work schedule for the next few days. He wanted the quality team with him. But he needed good people to cover the other two shifts. And he wanted an exploratory team ready to go into the repair room as soon as the outsiders left. Yash complained about that part of the plan. She wanted to go into the room herself.

But he couldn't risk his best people, not yet. Those environmental suits the outsiders wore worried him. He didn't want to lose any of his best staff to surprises. So the first exploratory team was made up of highly qualified junior officers, a few scientists, one excellent team leader that Coop was eyeing for promotion, and a couple of engineers.

The engineers and the scientists should figure out what was wrong with the equipment (if anything). They also had a bit of combat experience, so they could handle a surprise attack if the outsiders returned. And they had the expertise to download any information they could find off the shutdown equipment.

Coop would brief them himself. He wanted them ready for anything. He also wanted them to be careful in another way. He wanted them to leave everything the way they found it. He didn't want the outsiders to know they'd been there. That meant searching for other recording devices besides the ones inside the repair room. It also meant somehow making the recordings automatically taken by the equipment in the room inaccessible.

He wouldn't know how to do any of that, but he knew his engineers did. He hoped they would have enough time on their little mission to get all of that done.

Coop sent out the exploratory team one hour after the outsiders left. As Coop expected, the outsiders departed exactly six hours after they'd arrived. If the outsiders were going to come back in, if they had forgotten anything or needed to do anything else, then they would have done so within that hour.

Still, the exploratory team had instructions to leave the moment the door to the corridor got activated. With luck, they could all be inside the ship before any outsiders came into the room.

Coop scheduled his team for a little under five hours. That way, he figured, if the outsiders had switched to six-hour intervals, his team would be gone before they returned. Besides, he saw no reason to hurry. The *Ivoire* could remain in this base for months without opening her doors. By then, he suspected, the outsiders would be long gone. He would take that option if he had to. He just hoped he wouldn't have to.

Joanna Rossetti led the exploratory team. She was one of the best young officers Coop had ever the pleasure to work with. Had she been just a bit older and a bit more experienced, he would have promoted her to second officer instead of Lynda Rooney.

Not that he had ever had problems with Lynda Rooney.

Joanna Rossetti was thin and small, wiry and tough, more suited to space than land-based missions. She could fit anywhere, get into any small area, and often did. She had spent half her life training in zero-g, something a lot of the Fleet never did, and was adept at all kinds of space missions, from those in zero gravity to those in low gravity. Her small size made heavy gravity possible as well; she didn't feel as crushed by it as someone who weighed more.

She was also a thinker. She solved problems as fast as Coop did, faster than most of the people on his excellent bridge crew. That was one of the many things he liked about her. Coop let her choose the two officers that would go along with her. He figured she needed people she could trust. He hadn't been surprised when she chose Adam Shärf. Coop had been watching Shärf as well. Shärf was young, agile, and intelligent. He had a spotless record, and was known for stopping fights instead of starting them.

Her choice of Salvador Ahidjo did surprise Coop. As far as Coop knew—and he tried to keep track of all of his officers—Ahidjo had done nothing to distinguish himself throughout his career. Ahidjo was older than Coop and had remained at the same rank for nearly two decades. His work was fine but never outstanding. There was never any reason to promote or demote him. He was simply a solid member of the core, who did his job rather quietly and never rose to anyone's attention. Except, apparently, Rossetti's.

Coop didn't ask her about her choice. He was less concerned with the make-up of the officer level of the team than he was with the scientists and engineers. Here, he had to trust both Dix and Yash. Dix, who knew which scientists had the expertise and could work best in less than optimal conditions, and Yash, who knew her engineering team.

At Coop's request, she picked engineers who had once worked in a sector base or alongside the sector base technicians whenever the *Ivoire* was in a base. He wanted someone familiar with the equipment.

As for the scientists, he wanted creativity as well as the ability to work anywhere. He needed open minds, minds that could see alternatives that most scientists couldn't.

Dix said he knew the perfect three. Yash had more candidates than three, so Coop told her to pick the best, keeping the others on the list for later missions, if necessary.

He looked over the qualifications, tried to remember names and faces (knowing he would fail) and, ultimately, trusted his two senior staff members to make the best possible choices. Then he briefed the team, and sent them into what had once been the repair room of Sector Base V.

There were two theories of leadership among the commanders of the Fleet: the first theory believed that the leaders had the most expertise and therefore were the

least expendable; the second theory believed that the leaders had the most expertise and therefore had to be first on the ground, to make sure everything was fine. Clearly, Rossetti belonged in the second category.

Her tiny form looked even smaller as she climbed down the ladder from the exterior door and stepped onto the floor. Particles rose around her, thick and heavy, more of them than he had seen before. Some of them came from his cleaning of the ship, but the rest had to be coming from somewhere else.

The particles floated around her like snow. She captured some of them in her glove, and closed her fist, clearly doing a small test of her own.

Coop didn't say anything. He watched from the bridge, using the wall screens on full. Usually, when the ship was in motion, he kept the screens off or on half power. To have them on full continually made him feel as if only a thin membrane separated him from the repair room outside the ship. That feeling seemed even stronger now. As he watched his team step onto the repair room floor, he felt as if he could take one step through the membrane and join them. After all, he knew what it felt like to be in that room.

The last time he had been there, only a month before, the room had been slightly cold. The equipment functioned better in chilly conditions, so the staff kept the room cooler than the interior of most ships. And, one of the staff explained to him, a newly arrived ship always chilled the air. It still carried some of the cold from space, and that brought the ambient temperature down a few more degrees.

The air also had a metallic tang. The local staff claimed they couldn't smell it, but he could. Every section base he'd ever been to had a version of that smell. Sometimes the smell was tinged with sulfur, thanks to underground springs nearby, and sometimes it was laced with a chalky smell, one that came from the inside of the mountain itself. Every place was different. He knew if he had to, he could identify the sector bases he'd been to by smell alone.

The team he'd just sent into the repair room wasn't feeling cold or smelling a metallic tang. They were snug in their environmental suits, suits made of material so strong that the knife the outsider woman had worn wouldn't penetrate them.

The air filters were built into the suits themselves. The suits looked thin, but they weren't. They had three layers. The exterior was made of the impermeable material. The middle layer carried the oxygen stores, so that the suit's wearer didn't need oxygen canisters like the outsiders had. The interior layer measured and controlled body temperature, and maintained every other part of the environment that gave the suits their name.

These suits didn't even have separate helmets. Instead, they had full-face hoods with clear material that ran from the ears to the eyes, wide enough not to impede the wearer's vision, but much more protective than a glass or plastic plate over the face. The only problem with that part of the suit design was that Coop had to intuit mood. He couldn't see expression, except through the eyes themselves.

Not that it mattered. In this instance, he had told the team to communicate everything, so that he, Yash, and Dix could track what they were doing.

Through a special earpiece, Dix monitored the scientists on one channel. Yash monitored the engineers on another. Coop monitored the leaders on a third. The team spoke among themselves on a fourth channel, using it only when necessary, so that they didn't clutter up each other's hearing with needless chatter.

There wasn't much chatter on Coop's channel while the team waited on the floor for everyone to emerge from the airlock. He watched them in relative silence. Rossetti updated him with names as each person joined the group.

Once the team was assembled, she gave them instructions. They divided into three groups, each composed of an engineer, a scientist, and an officer. The engineer and

the scientist had been assigned to a section of equipment. The officer guarded them and provided advice.

Rossetti's team stayed closest to the ship. Coop had determined that. He wanted her near that door in case the outsiders returned. He also figured the active equipment up front would have the most information, so he made certain that his best team was on that section, instead of the farthest back.

Ahidjo's team took the middle section. Shärf's team took a far section. They only covered about an eighth of the repair room. More equipment faded into the dark. Coop would save that for later missions, if he needed them.

Of course, Rossetti's team reached their equipment first. They split, the engineer looking at the actual workings, the scientist taking the readings. Rossetti hung back, looking around as if she expected something bad to happen.

"Sir?"

Coop started. Rossetti's voice had come along a fifth channel, one that went directly into his earpiece. It sounded like she was standing beside him.

He had to change frequencies on the small mike he had placed in his front teeth. "What?" he subvocalized, so that he didn't disturb Dix or Yash.

"Something's odd here," Rossetti said.

He wanted to say, *No kidding*, but he knew better than to waste precious time talking. He simply waited for her to continue.

She did. "You've known me for some time. I'm not superstitious, but something feels wrong here. I can't quite figure out how to describe it."

"Try," he said.

She nodded once. Her head bob made more particles swirl around her. It looked like his team was in a particle storm.

Ahidjo's team had just reached the second section of equipment. The engineer touched the edge of the console, and lights flickered on.

Coop smiled. He had expected that. It confirmed what he had thought earlier; the outsiders had turned the equipment on when they'd started exploring the room.

On the third channel, he said, "Ahidjo, Shärf. Make sure your teams shut down that equipment before you leave today."

"Yes, sir," they said in unison.

Rossetti turned her head toward them, observing their progress for a moment. Then she continued on the fifth channel.

"If I had entered this place without knowing what it was," she said, her tone measured as if she was choosing each word carefully, "I would think that it had been abandoned long ago."

"Why?" he asked.

She shook her head, but he didn't think that was her entire response. It looked more like an involuntary movement, an I-don't-know kind of reaction. After that, she paused for a very long time.

"I can't give you a definitive answer to that, sir," she said. "It's just an impression."

Then she fell silent. Coop didn't expect her to say more. His people were used to quantifying things. The fact that she couldn't figure out a reason for her feeling probably bothered her more than it bothered him.

It had taken a bit of courage for Rossetti to tell him about that sense of abandonment. Yet she felt it important. She wasn't sensing lingering violence, the way he had upon entering an area after a battle; she was sensing emptiness.

Coop didn't like emptiness. He would have preferred the lingering violence. It suited his training so much better.

The third team reached their piece of equipment. The lights came on, but they looked very far away and faded. The particle storm made them hard to see.

Maybe the particle storm gave Rossetti that feeling; maybe it was something else. When the others returned, he would ask them if they had felt something similar. At the moment, however, they worked, updating him periodically, not saying exactly what they found—that was for the return briefing—but letting him know that the work was proceeding, that no one had entered the room (even though he could see that), that the equipment seemed to be working fine.

So far, no one had found any communications problems in the sector base's equipment, which meant that the *Ivoire*'s communications array had been damaged, just as Yash suspected. The engineers on his ship had even more work to do than they all initially thought.

The time passed quickly. Yash and Dix monitored their frequencies as well as doing work at their own consoles. But Coop just studied the repair room, unable to shake what Rossetti had said.

He had experienced the feeling of long-abandonment in a place recently vacated just once in his career. He'd been twenty-five. He was at Sector Base T, and he'd accompanied a senior officer as they did a final inspection of a decommissioned ship.

The ship, the *Défi*, had been badly damaged in an attack. Rather than repair it, the staff at Sector Base T would use it and another badly damaged hulk to build an entirely new ship.

The *Défi* had been Coop's home during the last of his education. A lot of cadets went there for officer training. The ship had had a lively, active student community, as well as the usual crew complement and domestic side. He had loved that place.

But it had seemed entirely different on that final walk-through, as if someone had taken the heart out of the ship. Which, apparently, they had. Without the human population, the *Défi* had become just another junked ship, ready to be torn down into its various parts.

That ship still haunted his dreams. Sometimes, old friends long gone would run down its corridors, laughing as they coaxed him into the Grog, the cadet bar. He didn't drink much—never had, really—so his presence in the Grog was always an event.

He would wake up feeling sad for something he had lost. Maybe that was what Rossetti was feeling. She had been here just a month ago as well. He had no idea what kind of experiences she had had during their layover. Maybe those were coloring her reaction now.

But that wasn't something he could discuss with her on Channel Five or Channel Three. He would wait until she returned.

At four hours and thirty minutes, he reminded his team that they had to shut down before they returned, and ordered additional cameras (if there were any) disabled. He wanted the interior to look as much like it had when the others left as his team could make it.

They began their shutdown procedures. In the distance, he saw the lights of the far sector shut off. At least that was working. The middle section went off. If the team returned quickly enough, maybe the particles would have stopped swirling.

He stood near the wall again, hands clasped behind him. His heartbeat had risen just slightly. He wanted the team to move more quickly, although he didn't say anything. He wanted them out before the outsiders returned. Ultimately, he needn't have worried. At the end of their fifth hour, they were all inside the airlock. The lights on the far panels had gone out, and the teams had reported that they had altered the feeds on all the cameras they could find.

The particle storm settled, just like Coop wanted it to. If the others worked on six-hour rotations, as he thought, he had built in an hour to spare. They would return soon.

He would let Rooney monitor them.

He would be in the briefing room with the teams, learning what they had found.

What they had found was troubling indeed.

The teams had arrived in the briefing room for the meeting with their handhelds. They all had wet hair and loose fitting clothes, having cleaned up after going into the repair room. The white environmental suits looked gray upon their return, and they'd peeled them off in the airlock, but some of the particles still stuck to their clothing, which was why Coop had approved real water showers as well as the standard sonic shower. He'd also made them change in the decontamination area, just in case.

The scientists and engineers sat toward the back of the room. The commanders clustered around one end of the table. Coop, Yash, and Dix sat at the other end.

The briefing room, like the bridge, had no portals. In here, the wall screens were usually off, but someone—probably Rossetti—had turned them on. There were no images, just an occasional multi-colored line through the center to show that the screens were drawing power.

"What've you got?" Coop asked Rossetti.

She was the only one of the group that didn't look tired. She sat, spine straight, directly across from him, her small hands flat on the tabletop.

"First," she said, "we don't need the suits. Every test we did says the atmosphere inside that room is fine."

"And the particles?" Dix asked.

"Harmless," she said. "They've been through more testing than we usually do on anything. They seem to be unbonded nanobits, and we've all worked around unbonded nanobits before."

They had. The bits occasionally got into the lungs, but could be removed with little effort. Many of the Fleet's crew members had no reaction to nanobits at all, and could, in fact, absorb them. It was, one of the medics once told Coop, a genetically desired trait that seemed to have developed in the Fleet's population over time.

Rossetti glanced at the others from the teams, then said, "It would be easier to work in the repair room without the environmental suits."

Her team had clearly asked her to say that. She hadn't done any hands-on work, so this wasn't coming from her experience.

"So noted," Coop said. He would make no promises without consulting with his best people. "What else do you have for me?"

Rossetti took a deep breath, then pressed her hands onto the tabletop. He finally understood why she sat that way; it was a calming gesture, one she clearly needed.

"Do you recall what I told you, sir, when I was on the repair room floor?"

"Yes," he said, and didn't elaborate. He hadn't mentioned it to his team, but he would tell them if they needed to know.

"Apparently, I was right. The sector base has been long abandoned, sir. The mandatory shutdown sequence began one hundred years after we left." She spoke flatly, as if the news hadn't bothered her at all. But her splayed hands belied that.

"One hundred years?" Dix said.

Coop's heart was pounding. "We left a month ago," he said.

"Yes, sir," Rossetti said. "But the elapsed time in the station is at least two hundred years, maybe longer."

She hadn't insulted his intelligence by explaining how such a thing could happen. They all knew. It was one of the risks of the *anacapa* drive. The drive folded space, which meant that it could (and often did) cause a ship to go out of time.

During those fifteen days stranded in that unidentified part of space, Coop had worried about this aspect of the *anacapa* drive. He had known that foldspace occasionally caused time alterations. His training taught him not to worry until he was confronted with them. Which he was now.

"You're certain of this?" he asked.

He looked at the scientists and engineers. What he had initially taken for exhaustion was defeat. And fear.

If their calculations were right, they were at least two hundred years in their own future, in an empty sector base, with a damaged ship.

They saw only catastrophe.

Coop knew that in this instance, time was on his side. If he could repair the *Ivoire*, he could send her through foldspace to the place where the Fleet might be. His calculations (and theirs) could be as much as fifty years off, but that wouldn't matter. The Fleet followed a set trajectory. Only battles and meetings with other cultures changed the timeline. Coop's team could guess the farthest that the Fleet would get on that trajectory, and go there. If the Fleet had already arrived, they could continue until they caught it (which wouldn't take long). If the Fleet hadn't arrived yet (which was more likely), they could wait for it to catch them.

The older members of the crew might never see the Fleet again, but the younger members would.

If the scientists were right.

If the *Ivoire* truly was two hundred years in its own future.

"Two hundred years is manageable," Yash said softly, clearly mistaking his silence for shock.

"I know," he said, just as softly, silencing her.

He folded his own hands on the tabletop. He was strangely calm. Now that he knew what was happening, he would probably remain calm until they had a firm plan.

"What kind of evidence do you have?" he asked Rossetti.

She turned to one of the engineers, the only one that Coop had ever interacted with, an older man by the name of José Cabral.

"The equipment itself gives us the timeline," Cabral said. "The sector base closed one hundred years after we left. A rudimentary staff remained, those who didn't want to travel with the Fleet to Sector Base Y, which was where this group would be posted. This staff continued to live on the surface, charged with maintaining the equipment at low power levels for the next fifty years."

Coop nodded. This was standard procedure.

Dix shifted in his chair. The news clearly made him nervous.

"After fifty years without human contact," Cabral said, "the equipment went dormant. Everything shut down except the touch command."

Touch command. Meaning that the systems would only reactivate if the equipment was touched by human hands. Coop would have to confirm that with Yash, but he didn't think some kind of falling debris would activate the system. Just contact from a member of the Fleet. At least, that was what he had been told.

"How long has this base been dormant?" Coop asked.

"Impossible to tell, sir," Cabral said. "When the system goes dormant, even its internal clock mechanism ceases. Only the *anacapa* drive continues to function, at a very low level, of course, and then only because it is safer to keep the drive running than it is to shut it down."

Coop nodded. He had been told that as well.

"If I may, sir." One of the scientists, a middle-aged woman, spoke up. She was thin, with harsh lines around her mouth and eyes. Coop had to struggle to recall her name, which he had only heard in the context of this mission. "The evidence points toward the machinery being off for a very long time."

One of the other scientists held up his hand, as if to stop her, but she caught it in her own and brought it down.

"What evidence?" Coop asked.

"The particles, sir," she said. "Nanobits are durable. They don't lose their bonding except in a few instances. When they do lose their bonding, it's usually through a chemical reaction that we haven't seen here, or the room itself would be toxic."

"And the other instance?" Coop asked.

"Time," she said. "Specifically, five hundred to a thousand years, sir."

"We don't have proof of that," said the scientist whose hand she still held. "We just have supposition."

"And past experience," she said. "We've encountered this before, and by we, I mean the Fleet. Never have the nanobits lost their bonding in less than five hundred years."

Coop's stomach flipped. He had to work to keep his hands relaxed, so that his knuckles wouldn't show white.

"We'll have to test to be certain," said one of the other scientists. He wasn't looking at Coop, but at Dix. Dix, who sat rigidly next to Coop. Dix, who, rumor had it, had fallen in love with one of the chefs on the *Geneva*.

The *Geneva*, which was traveling with the Fleet.

If the Fleet was five hundred years distant from them, in no way could Coop plot the Fleet's course. There were too many variables. Two hundred years was at the very edge of possible. Five hundred years meant that the *Ivoire* would never rejoin the Fleet.

Coop wouldn't let himself think of that. He didn't have proof.

"The equipment itself isn't damaged," Rossetti said, trying to take control of the briefing back from her scientist. "It's just old."

Coop nodded.

"We should be able to use information in the database to help us fix the *Ivoire*," she said.

He nodded again. He wasn't thinking about that quite as much. He knew his engineers could fix the *Ivoire*. She had extensive damage, but none of it was catastrophic.

He was more concerned about their current situation.

"The outsiders," he said and paused. Everyone looked at him. They clearly hadn't expected him to mention the outsiders at this point. "You told me their suits looked underdeveloped."

He said this last to Yash.

She nodded. "Ours are technically superior, if that glove is any indication."

"Oxygen cylinders, knives, inferior suits," he said. "Their society didn't develop from ours, then."

"Probably not," Yash said.

"So the settlement on the surface is gone," he said.

She shrugged. "We don't know that."

He nodded again. Two hundred years was a long time. They were going to need to know about the history of Sector Base V as well as Venice City, what they had missed, and what they faced.

"I assume that the shutdown was a standard shutdown," he said to Rossetti.

By that, he meant that the sector base was shut down because the Fleet had moved on, not because of some problem on the planet itself.

Rossetti had to look at her team.

José Cabral nodded. "Yes, sir," he said, answering for all of them. "The shutdown was ordered by the Fleet and completed according to procedure. Staff remained behind. At that time, Venice City was a thriving community, and many people did not want to leave."

"No indications that anything went wrong on the surface?" Coop asked.

"None," Cabral said.

Coop nodded. "Clearly, we're going to need more information. We need to know how much time has elapsed. I'm also going to want to talk with the outsiders."

"You, sir?" Rossetti said, before biting her lower lip. She clearly hadn't meant to speak out of turn. The statement had been involuntary.

"Yes," he said.

"I don't think we should surprise them," Yash said.

"We won't," he said. "We'll let them know we're here."

Maybe the outsiders had answers. If nothing else, he could get past them and travel up to the surface. Someone in Venice City had to know something.

If Venice City remained.

He shuddered at that thought. Maybe the old-timers had been right. Maybe they should have been careful about how they named their city. They had named it Venice City because the Earth city had been built on canals. But it had eventually disappeared under the water.

What if this Venice had disappeared as well?

He placed his hands flat on the table and used them to push himself to his feet.

"Thank you all for the work," he said. "You'll have new orders tomorrow. We're going to figure out exactly when we are. But know this: we'll be all right." He sounded confident even though he didn't feel confident. He felt as if someone had shut off the ship's gravity, and he was floating, unfettered, in a world he thought he knew.

The others, though, seemed calmer. Maybe it was the shared knowledge. Maybe it was the fact that they were not in charge of it; he was, and, as their commander, he was the one who needed to solve the problem. But he knew, as a commander—as a human being—that some problems had no easy solution.

Coop had to work on three things at once: He had to repair the *Ivoire*; he had to download information from the sector base; and he had to approach the outsiders.

He ordered his engineering staff to concentrate on the *Ivoire*'s repairs. He needed the ship in full working order so that they could leave Sector Base V at a moment's notice.

He assigned the scientists and some junior engineers to the sector base team. If repairs were needed on the sector base equipment, his senior engineering staff could handle those after they finished with the *Ivoire*.

He alone was going to worry about the outsiders. His first step: he had to let them know he was here. So, after the outsiders left from their latest foray into the repair room, he sent Rossetti's team back into the room, with orders to download information and to leave the equipment running when they completed their five-hour mission.

Rossetti's team didn't wear environmental suits. The team had no trouble working, and didn't seem to have any ill effects from the particles. The studies were correct; the room itself was as harmless as it had been two hundred plus years before.

The team worked hard. They left the equipment running when they returned to the ship. They went through decontamination and testing to make certain they remained healthy, and they continued their work inside the *Ivoire*. They weren't to contact him unless or until they had processed new information from their downloads.

He was less concerned with that information than he was with the outsiders. He made sure he had control of the bridge when the outsiders returned.

They opened the door at the exact moment he expected them. The woman came in first. She stopped and held out a hand, as if to prevent the others from entering.

Then she took some tentative steps forward. She paused, looked around the room, and then turned toward the ship. For a moment, it felt as if she was looking through the screens directly at Coop. He felt his breath catch.

She had received his message; she clearly knew that someone was in the ship, that it hadn't arrived automatically without a crew on board. Then she backed toward the door, stepped back into the corridor with the rest of her team, and pulled the door closed.

He wanted to commend her: *Good job. You have no idea about the nature of the threat, or even if your team is prepared for it. But you do know that we've been observing you. And that we're here.*

He knew she wouldn't return until she felt ready to do so, and he liked that as well. Still, he watched for another hour, waiting. When she didn't return, he felt oddly disappointed, and just as oddly pleased.

"I need Rossetti, Shärf, Ahidjo, and Perkins on the bridge," he said to Dix.

"Yes, sir," Dix said.

Coop stood, his hands behind his back, and studied that empty repair room. What would he do if he were the woman?

He would have retreated, as she had. He would have briefed his team. Then he would return, with his team ready for anything.

But he would return as soon as possible.

"Sir?" Rossetti had come onto the bridge. Her hair had the flyaway quality of the newly dry, but she wore her uniform—red with black, the sign of the Fleet, the same version of the uniform she had worn on her first trip into the repair room without an environmental suit.

"Sorry to bring you back here so soon, Joanna," Coop said, "but I need you to go out there and wait for the outsiders."

Shärf arrived, then Ahidjo, both wearing their uniforms as well. Perkins was only a moment behind them. She wore her dress uniform, the one the Fleet demanded its linguists wear for first contact.

"The three of you will guard Special Officer Perkins," Coop said. "You will wait near the door of the *Ivoire* until the outsiders return. Perkins will do all of the talking, even if the outsiders address the rest of you. She knows the protocol. You do not. Is that understood?"

All four of them nodded. Perkins' eyes were bright. As uncomfortable as she had felt after the failure of talks with the Quurzod, she was clearly eager to get back to work. As young and new as Perkins was, her enthusiasm was one of the things Coop liked about her. She clearly loved this work and wanted to do it.

"If they don't return, sir?" Rossetti asked.

"They will," he said.

"But if they don't, sir?"

She wanted to know how long they would stand out there, waiting.

"Give it three hours, Joanna. If they haven't come back in that time, we'll go on as if they're not coming back. You four can return to the ship and rest."

"Thank you, sir," Rossetti said.

"I do need you carrying weapons," Coop said. "Just in case."

Rossetti nodded.

"Me too, sir?" Perkins asked.

It wasn't procedure for the linguist to be armed.

"No," he said. "But remember that at least one member of the outsiders' team is carrying a knife. Don't get within striking range."

Perkins straightened her shoulders. "I won't, sir."

"Good," he said, sending them out of the bridge. "And good luck."

The communications array still wasn't repaired. He wouldn't be able to listen to any conversation that Perkins had with the outsiders, which was probably just as well. He'd listened to such negotiations before, and they had always confused him.

The tangle of languages made easy understanding difficult. Even if he could listen, he wasn't sure that he would. He didn't want to let his perceptions get in the way of his linguist.

The team had just stepped out of the airlock when the exterior door opened. Coop felt his heart rate increase.

This was the dangerous moment—the moment when anything could happen. The outsiders could leave. They could feel threatened and attack.

But they did neither of those things. They just froze at the doorway and stared at Rosetti's team. Then, slowly, the woman reached up and removed the helmet of her environmental suit.

Yash gasped. Coop glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "Problems?" he asked.

"We can handle this environment. What if they can't?"

Coop shrugged. "She would know what they can and can't handle."

But he said no more. He had suspected the outsiders' leader had forced her team to wear the suits out of an excess of caution. Her willingness to remove her helmet when she saw his crew convinced him he was right.

The woman wasn't pretty. She was too thin, the kind of thinness he'd seen in professional spacers all over the known universe. Her cheeks were hollow, but her eyes were bright and filled with intelligence. He couldn't adequately judge her age. Not young, but not old. Maybe his age, maybe not.

She spoke, and Coop instantly changed his mind about the tangle of languages. He would have given anything to hear this conversation.

Perkins stepped forward so that she stood a few feet in front of the three officers. Then she pressed her hands together and bowed, a greeting that the Fleet had learned was acceptable in most human cultures.

Perkins did not speak. Clearly, then, the language that the outsider woman had used wasn't familiar to Perkins. Coop felt oddly disappointed. He'd hoped that the woman and the other outsiders would be able to clear up the mystery quickly, easily, and with just a few words. Clearly that wasn't going to happen.

The outsider woman watched, shrugged, and then bobbed her head. Her companions didn't move. Nor did they remove their helmets. Either she had ordered them to keep the helmets on, or they weren't as courageous as she was.

Perkins tapped herself and spoke. The woman stared at her. Perkins made the same gesture and spoke again.

The woman nodded once, then tapped her own shoulder. She spoke.

Perkins frowned.

The woman repeated the gesture.

Perkins said something and the woman glanced at the people behind her.

A man removed his helmet. He was younger than Coop, slender but not thin like the woman, with dark hair and eyes that glittered. He spoke to the woman, and then looked at Perkins.

She opened her hands as if to say that she didn't understand.

The man tapped his own shoulder, then spoke. Then he put a hand on the outsider woman's shoulder and spoke again.

Perkins tilted her head, then talked for a good minute or more.

The man and woman looked relieved. Clearly they and Perkins had actually communicated. Perkins said something else, the others nodded, and then Perkins bowed again.

She signaled to the team that they were done, and they went back into the ship.

The man said something to the woman, but she shook her head. Then she ushered her team out of the repair room and back into the corridor.

The meeting was done.

Coop wanted to run to the airlock and find out exactly what had happened, but he

knew better. He waited on the bridge until Perkins contacted him. Then the two of them went into the briefing room.

She looked more excited than he had ever seen her. She had scrubbed down and changed out of her uniform, and wore a less dressy version of it for her meeting with him.

"I captured a lot of their speech patterns," she said. "They spoke to each other quite a bit, and I captured that, which is good."

Coop had forgotten this about her. Perkins never gave a report in a linear manner.

"They don't speak Standard, then," he said.

She paused and looked at him. Then she gave him a rueful smile. "Oh, yeah. Sorry. You weren't listening in. I'm not sure what they speak. It sounded familiar when the woman started talking to us, but I couldn't understand her. I thought at first that she was speaking Standard, but pronouncing it differently, so differently that I had trouble processing it. Then I realized that the words sounded familiar but weren't familiar."

"Which means what?" Coop asked.

"Which means they might be speaking a mangled form of Standard or some kind of pidgin language. It might also be a related language with similar sounds. I already have the computer working on it, and I expect to have results before our next meeting with them, which I'm hoping will be tomorrow."

"Did you set that up with them?"

She shrugged. "As best I could. They seemed pretty startled by us. They seemed even more shocked that we had trouble communicating."

"Did you understand anything they said?"

"I think so, but I'm not sure."

Coop frowned. She had never given him that response before. "What do you mean?"

"It's that sound-like thing I mentioned," Perkins said. "I gave the woman my name. The woman did the same thing, but I think she gave me her rank."

"Which is?"

"She's their leader."

"That's clear," Coop said.

"But I'm not sure that's what she said," Perkins said. "I thought we were doing pretty well. I said my name, she responded with her title, and then I asked her where we were. The man stepped forward and introduced himself."

"I noticed that," Coop said.

"But his name sounded like an object," she said. "In our language, his name means bridge. So the woman might have been giving me her name and it's something other than a title. I got very confused at that point, which is why I called the meeting off. I wanted more information from the computer before I went farther."

"All right," Coop said. Then, because he couldn't help himself, he said, "When do you think I can talk to them?"

"Sir, this could take weeks."

"Not if the language is related."

"I said I'm guessing," she said.

"I know," he said, feeling a touch of color warm his cheeks. He had vowed he wasn't going to let the crew know about his impatience, and then he revealed it to Perkins. "Sorry. The sooner we can question them about substantive things, the better off we are."

"I know, sir," she said, "but it's better to understand them than to guess, don't you think?"

He nodded, reluctantly. He wanted that conversation and he wanted it soon. Just like he wanted the ship repaired. Just like he wanted to know when they were.

"Good work," he said to Perkins. "Let me know when you have enough of the language to act as a translator."

"I will, sir," she said. "And I'll try to make it sooner rather than later." *I hope so*, he almost said, but didn't. *I really, really hope so.*

It took Perkins nearly two weeks to figure out the outsiders' language with any kind of precision. During that time, the engineers managed most of the major repairs on the ship. Coop sifted through much of the information pulled from the repair room's equipment, but didn't come up with any more information than his team was finding.

He repeatedly had communications contact Venice City, but didn't get any response. As the sensors came back online, he mapped the underground caverns around the repair room. The entire complex was much bigger than it had been the month before.

And as the equipment got repaired, he had his team see what the sensors could find on the surface.

There was a city in the narrow valley, just as there had been for decades. But the city was no longer in the same place. Instead, it was scattered along the mountain-side, far away from the city center that Coop had visited several times. He knew that cities sprawled, but he had never seen one that abandoned its original site.

All of these pieces of information didn't add up into anything coherent, not yet, which made talking to the outsiders all the more imperative.

The number of outsiders never changed, and although Perkins asked the woman what their group was called, she never got an answer she understood.

She was understanding more and more, however, partly because of the outsiders themselves. After a few days, one of the outsiders, the man who called himself Bridge, showed an ability to speak Perkins's language. It took Perkins another day or two to understand him because the man mangled every single word he tried to say. It was almost as if he was familiar with the language in its written form, but hadn't ever spoken it.

At least, that was Perkins' hypothesis. Coop wasn't so certain. If the outsiders could read Standard, then how come they hadn't heeded the warnings written all over the floor in the repair room? How come they seemed surprised when the ship nearly crushed one of them?

Still, Coop wasn't the linguist, and he had to rely on Perkins' expertise to figure out what was going on. In less than two weeks, Perkins decided that the language the outsiders spoke was a form of Standard, but so changed by time and distance, as well as influence from other cultures, as to be practically unrecognizable.

The fact that the man called Bridge could speak her language, though, didn't bode well, as she told Coop in one of their briefings. "Sir, I think all of this means that we speak an old and possibly forgotten form of their language. One that is no longer active, but lives only in archives."

He felt a chill run through him, even though on some deep level, he expected her to say that.

"How long does it take for a language to change like that?"

She shrugged. "There are instances of that happening within a few hundred years of no contact."

"But?" he asked.

"But, generally, it happens over many centuries. Five, six, seven hundred years or more."

He stared at her. It was within the realm of possibility. They had gotten the ship to talk with the equipment in the repair room, but hadn't gleaned any more information about the time factor. Some of the scientific tests had come back that the equipment itself had aged several hundred years, but, as the scientists said, some of that

could have been due to the proximity of a working (and possibly malfunctioning) *anacapa* drive.

"They can't be from the future of Venice City," he said. "Their suits aren't as evolved as ours."

She shrugged. "They're from our future. Somewhere they acquired our language. Then they lost touch with us, and the language changed, as languages do."

"It's time for me to talk to them," he said. "Can you clearly translate for us?"

"If we do it in the *Ivoire*," she said. "I need the computer to back me up."

He thought about that for a moment. He had always envisioned the meeting to take place inside the repair room. He hadn't wanted the outsiders in his ship. But he understood Perkins's point. And he needed the information now more than he needed to protect the ship's secrets.

Not that it had a lot of secrets from the outsiders. They had access to similar equipment in the repair room, but something prevented them from understanding what they had found.

If they did learn to understand the equipment, they would understand his ship as well.

So there wasn't much he could hide from them.

He just had to hope that the barrier—whatever it was—would continue.

"All right," Coop said. "Set up an appointment."

"Yes, sir," Perkins said.

"And I don't want her whole team in here. Bring her and the man who speaks the language—Bridge?—into the briefing room. You and I will talk to them."

"All right, sir," Perkins said. She looked relieved. Everyone on the *Ivoire* was nervous. Everyone wanted answers because, as Dix told Coop, they were making up worst case scenarios the longer this went on.

Coop didn't have to ask what those worst case scenarios were. He had been making up his own.

Initially they had involved being stranded in Sector Base V forever, but now that the *Ivoire* was mostly repaired, he knew that wouldn't happen. Now he just had to figure out where he would take his crew, and when.

And for that, he needed to talk to the outsiders as soon as he possibly could.

He set up the briefing room as if he were receiving heads of state. For all he knew, he was. He had his personal chef make some pastries and lay out various snacks. He set out bottles of wine he had picked up at Starbase Kappa. He also had flavored waters cooling on a sideboard, and various hot liquids on the other side of the room.

He wore his dress uniform. He posted two guards inside the room as a show of force, and had several others standing by. But he still planned to meet the woman and Bridge with only Perkins at his side.

Coop didn't greet them at the airlock. He had Perkins do that, along with another set of guards. He ordered the areas where the outsiders would walk blocked off, so that they would have no contact with anyone except him and Perkins.

He watched the wall screen as the outsiders stepped out of the airlock. The woman came first, then the man. The woman looked around as if she were trying to take in every detail. She even touched the wall gently with her fingers, as if trying to see what it was made out of.

As they walked through the corridors of the ship, the woman would occasionally reach out and touch a door frame or run her fingers along a wall. Coop contacted Yash and asked if she was seeing all of this.

She was and, she assured him, the woman could do no harm with her naked fingertips.

He wasn't worried so much about naked fingertips. He was worried about some little nanovirus or something she had attached to her fingertips. Yash promised to have the walls wiped as soon as the outsiders left the corridor, and she would let him know if anything was amiss.

It took nearly fifteen minutes for the outsiders to walk from the airlock to the briefing room. As they stopped by the guards, Coop shut off the wall screen and stood at the head of the table, his hands clasped behind his back.

He was oddly nervous. He checked in with himself. He wasn't nervous because he thought he might get some answers. He had already figured out that he wasn't going to like the timeline the woman would give him—if, indeed, she had one. He suspected the *Ivoire* was much farther than two hundred years away from the Fleet. The evidence kept coming in that the *Ivoire* was at least five hundred years away.

Coop had been thinking of how to break that news to his crew for more than a week now, the news that they were on their own, stranded in the future, with no purpose, no mission, and no chance of ever seeing the Fleet again. He hadn't quite come to terms with that, but he was braced for it.

So he wasn't nervous that the outsiders would tell him a timeline he didn't want to hear. He was nervous about meeting them. And really, if he was honest with himself, he wasn't nervous about them. He was nervous about her.

The woman had intrigued him from the start, even before he could see her face clearly. She explored an area that had clearly been abandoned, but she hadn't looted it. She had treated it with respect.

She seemed to be gathering information. When she saw the ship, she didn't flee, nor did she use weapons to try to break in. She continued her own explorations, and she also tried to figure out the ship.

Then, when she realized the ship was occupied, she didn't attack. She regrouped, came back, and did her best to communicate with Perkins. She had shown intelligence, curiosity, and courage, all traits that Coop admired. He felt as if he was going to meet a colleague, not someone who could do him any harm. He straightened his shoulders as the door slid open.

The woman came in first, her movements slow, but not tentative. She was slighter than Coop expected. Her image on the wall screen had distorted her height, made her seem taller than she actually was. But she had presence. He could feel it as she moved toward him, hand outstretched.

"Boss," she said.

At least, that was what it sounded like. Coop glanced at Perkins.

"That's what they call her," Perkins said. "I don't know if it's a name or her title."

"Or both," Coop said.

The man, Bridge, was watching the conversation: His eyes glittered more than any eyes Coop had ever seen. They must have been artificial. Bridge seemed to be taking in the entire conversation.

Coop decided to ignore him for a moment, and kept his attention on the woman. He took her hand. It was dry and small, warmer than he expected, certainly warmer than his own hand.

"I'm Jonathan Cooper, the commander of this ship," he said. "People call me Coop." Perkins translated.

The woman nodded. She repeated, "Coop."

He smiled. "Yes."

He hadn't let go of her hand. She hadn't let go of his. She didn't smile in return, but the skin around her eyes crinkled as if she was pleased.

"Special Officer Perkins here," Coop said, "isn't certain if your name is Boss or if that's your title."

The man stepped forward. He seemed alarmed that Coop hadn't let go of the woman's hand.

"I'm Bridge," he said, his words barely understandable. "Boss is her name and her title."

The woman said something to Bridge, and he responded.

"They call you by your title?" Coop asked her, without looking at Bridge or Perkins.

"I prefer it," the woman said. Or rather, Perkins said. Her translations were a bit slow, but they made Coop feel like he was having a conversation—albeit an awkward one—with the woman.

"Surely you can understand my position," Coop said. "As commander of this ship, I can't call someone else Boss."

The woman shrugged, her hand still locked in his. "Then call me what you will."

She wasn't going to tell him anything else, not yet, and he wasn't going to call her Boss.

Bridge came up beside her. "I'm McAllister Bridge," he said in very bad Standard. "I'll do my best to assist your translator."

Coop reluctantly let go of the woman's hand, but he didn't extend his hand to Bridge, nor did Bridge extend his to Coop.

"Thank you," Coop said. "I think we need all the help we can get trying to communicate with each other."

He pulled back a chair at the side of the table for the woman. Then he indicated that they both should sit.

He went to the sideboard, held up the carafe of wine, and raised his eyebrows, silently asking the outsiders if they wanted some.

Bridge looked at the woman. So she was in charge, even if this Bridge was a bit pushy.

"Yes," the woman said, and that word was clear. So she knew some Standard as well.

Coop looked at Bridge. He nodded.

Coop poured four glasses of wine. He set Perkins's glass across the table from the woman's.

Then he sat down at the head of the table. "We have a lot of questions," Coop said. "We would have talked before, but we wanted to make sure we could understand each other."

The woman finally smiled. The expression pulled her face together, making her seem both younger and prettier.

"That makes sense," she said.

Coop folded his hands together. "It seems to me," he said as clearly and slowly as he could, "that you seemed surprised when our ship arrived. Why is that? Didn't you know that ships could land here?"

Bridge looked at the woman as Perkins translated. Bridge started to answer, but the woman held up her hand. She leaned forward just a little so that she blocked Bridge's line of sight.

So, they had a few issues about who was in charge. Bridge verbally acknowledged the woman's authority, by calling her Boss and telling Coop that was her position, but he didn't seem to like her control.

The way that the woman tolerated Bridge without disciplining him in any way reinforced Coop's sense that theirs was not a military operation. It was something else.

"This area has been abandoned for a very long time," the woman said. "No one even knew the equipment was down here. It surprised us. We were just starting to explore this giant compound when your ship arrived."

Coop hadn't expected that answer. He'd expected something more concrete, something like, *The base has been abandoned for two hundred years, so we didn't think anyone was using it.* . . .

"If you didn't know the base was here," he said, "why were you exploring underground?"

Bridge's hand lightly brushed the woman's arm, but she ignored him. Clearly he didn't want her to say something. And, just as clearly, she wasn't going to listen to him.

"We were tracking the power source," she said. "We're familiar with it. We've found it throughout this sector. It's dangerous and it's causing problems on the surface."

"The power source?" Coop looked at Perkins, who shrugged.

"I'm not sure of the translation," she said to him. "That's what I understand and that's what the computer gives us."

"Your stealth drive," Bridge said. He had to speak the words three times before Coop understood him. Perkins still looked a bit confused.

"Stealth drive?" Coop said.

"The energy signature," Bridge said. "The thing that allows Dignity Vessels to cloak. It's still active in this underground area."

Dignity Vessels. Coop peered at Bridge and then asked him to repeat his words. Bridge did. Coop glanced at Perkins, who nodded just once.

She had caught the same thing Coop had. The words "Dignity Vessels" had surprised them both.

Dignity Vessel was the original name of the ships in the Fleet. The name came from the Fleet's original mission, to bring peace and dignity throughout the known universe.

The Fleet never did bring peace. They focused more on justice. And they did try to restore dignity where there was none. But they didn't call themselves Dignity Vessels, although the words were still part of the ship's identification numbers. That these people knew what Dignity Vessels were gave Coop hope that less time had passed than he feared.

"What kind of trouble on the surface?" Coop asked.

"The excess energy," the woman said quickly, before Bridge could answer, "creates death holes."

Or at least, that was what Perkins thought she said. Perkins ran the sentence through the computer as well and got a similar translation. Bridge watched it all with curiosity.

"Death holes?" Coop asked. "Sink holes?"

"A wave of energy blows through the ground, like a geyser," the woman said, "creating a tunnel. Vaycehn occasionally loses entire neighborhoods to these tunnels."

"Vaycehn?" Coop asked.

"It's what they call Venice City," Perkins said, with an edge in her voice.

Coop didn't want to explore that edge, not at the moment, anyway.

"You're convinced these death holes are caused by something down here?" Coop asked the woman.

"We know it. A big hole opened when your ship arrived."

Coop frowned. Clearly something had malfunctioned. "Why didn't you contact the Fleet?"

The woman looked at Bridge. He shook his head slightly. She put her hand on his for just a moment, as if to keep him silent.

"Because," the woman said after a moment, "until your ship arrived, we thought the Fleet was just a legend."

"What?" Coop asked.

The woman looked a little sheepish. "We've found some ruined Dignity Vessels before. I've dived some of the wrecks. But I never thought I'd see a functioning ship with a functioning crew."

"Because we're a legend," Coop said.

"No one knows much about you," she said. "We thought you traveled in large groups, going from section to section, distributing justice."

"We do," he said.

"But no one has any evidence of that. What we do know is garbled, lost to time and mythology. Some places claim you exist and that you helped them create their civilizations. Some say you never existed. Others claim you were rogue agents fleeing a dying government, and that you stirred up trouble wherever you went."

The hair on the back of his neck had risen. How long did it take for the Fleet's exploits to get lost?

"What do you say?" Coop asked.

"I say that your Dignity Vessels have turned into the greatest mystery of my life."

"A mystery I can solve for you," he said.

She shrugged, as if she didn't want to commit to the idea. "I don't see a Fleet here," she said. "You're just one ship."

"We were damaged," he said. "We came here for repairs."

True enough, but not complete. He didn't want to give her the full answer—not yet. "Alone?" Bridge asked.

She put her hand on his again, as if to remind him that she was asking the questions.

"The base should have been active," Coop said. "We only left a month ago."

Bridge shook his head. "That's not possible."

"Shut up, Bridge," the woman said. She didn't seem surprised by Coop's words. Bridge did. She knew more about Dignity Vessels and the Fleet than she was admitting.

"How long has this base been abandoned?" Coop asked.

Bridge crossed his arms and leaned back, as if he expected to be consulted on the question. The woman ignored him.

"We don't know exactly," she said.

"But you have a guess," he said.

"No, I don't," she said. "I don't guess."

He appreciated that. "What do you know?"

She took a deep breath. Her face was filled with compassion. She turned to Perkins.

"I hope you can translate this accurately," she said.

"I'll try," Perkins said, or at least, that was what Coop thought she said. Some of the words in the outsiders' language did sound familiar. He understood now why Perkins had been so cautious. Sometimes familiar words led to greater misunderstandings than unknown words.

"What we know is this." The woman spoke slowly, obviously doing so to make it easier for Perkins to translate. "The city of Vaycehn is the oldest known city in the sector. Vaycehn has been here, in one form or another, for five thousand years."

"No," Coop said before he even realized he had spoken. He made himself breathe. Maybe Perkins had mistranslated. "The city above was called Venice. Venice City. It was the first settlement ever on Wyr."

Wyr was the name the Fleet had given this planet.

"Wyr." The woman repeated the word without waiting for the translation, and then nodded. "Yes. We're on Wyr."

"Venice City," he prompted.

"The oldest known settlement here is in the area with the worst of the death holes," the woman said. "It's five thousand years old."

"So far as our records show," Bridge said, "this place has always been called Vaycehn."

"Bridge, enough," the woman said. There was warning in her voice, and a toughness to her posture. Coop was beginning to understand why they called her Boss. He wouldn't want to make her angry.

"There's no record of Venice City?" Coop asked.

"None," the woman said.

"Sir," Perkins said. "The way that language morphs, and the way that these people speak . . ."

Coop looked at her. So did Bridge. No one was translating for the woman called Boss, at least not yet.

"Venice City could be mispronounced, mangled, changed over the centuries through pronunciation errors," Perkins said. "It could have become Vaycehn."

"That's supposition, Perkins," Coop said. "We're trying to figure out facts here."

She nodded once.

But he understood her all the same. She thought—Bridge thought; hell, the woman named Boss thought—that Vaycehn had been here for at least five thousand years. If Vaycehn was a settlement placed on the ruins of Venice City, then Venice City had been built even longer ago.

The very idea made Coop's mind hurt.

Five thousand years. How did one month become five thousand years?

"Are you sure you're translating the numbers correctly?" Coop asked Perkins.

"The computer is confirming them," she said.

"But you programmed it," he said. "Could you have programmed it wrong?"

Her expression remained impassive. No flashes of anger, no sense of doubt. "Anything's possible, sir," she said.

Then she turned to Bridge and said something in his language.

He responded in his bad Standard. "Boss is talking about five thousand years. Fifty one-hundred-year cycles."

Coop's stomach clenched. He was glad he had his hands clasped together. He didn't want the others to see them shaking.

"You're sure of that?" he asked.

Both Bridge and the woman nodded.

"My God," he said, and stood up. "My God."

He walked over to the sideboard, his heart pounding. Five hundred years would have been a disaster. Five thousand was an impossibility.

Except that the *anacapa* drive in the station was malfunctioning, creating something called death holes. The *Ivoire* had all kinds of damage as well. Together both *anacapa* drives—one clearly malfunctioning and one that might be—had rescued the *Ivoire* from that fifteen-day death float, and brought it here, where it could be repaired.

But it could never ever rejoin the Fleet.

Not even if Coop wanted it to. Not even if he could figure out how to traverse fold-space to reach some point in the Fleet's trajectory. The errors he would make in a two hundred year timeline would make it just barely possible to catch up to the Fleet. The errors he would make in a five hundred year timeline would make it impossible to catch the Fleet.

He couldn't even map the distance between the *Ivoire* and the Fleet with any kind of accuracy. Not over five thousand years. Not even with a working *anacapa* and fold-space on his side.

The Fleet might as well be a legend.

And the *Ivoire* had just become a ghost.

He didn't look at Perkins. He wanted to maintain some kind of emotional control.

He needed his own people on this. Although he knew what they would find. The

evidence had been there already: the language, the unbonded nanobits, the condition of the equipment. He made himself focus.

"So you're from Venice City?" he asked the woman as he turned around.

The woman's expression was filled with compassion. She had an idea of what he was going through. He didn't want her to think of him that way. He didn't want her to feel sorry for him.

"No," she said. "I'm not from Venice City. I am not from Vaycehn either."

That surprised him.

"What are you doing here, then?" he asked.

Bridge started to answer but she glared at him.

"We came because of the death holes," she said.

"Came from where?" he asked.

"The Nine Planet Alliance," she said.

It meant nothing to him, just as is she had known it would.

"Did Venice City—Vaycehn—hire you to solve this death-hole problem?" he asked. She shook her head.

"Then why are you here?" he asked.

"Because we're trying to understand your technology," she said. "It's littered throughout the sector, and it's killing people."

Killing people. Coop shook his head. Killing people.

It was taking a moment for words to get through his brain. He was in some kind of shock. Unexpected harsh news did that. News that led to grieving. And he would have a lot of grieving to do. He had lost not just his friends, but his entire world.

He made himself focus on the woman's words. He was the commander of this ship, and, in his training, he had learned how to get past a shocking fog. He had learned how to operate even when everything seemed like it had gone wrong.

"I'm sorry," he said. "The technology is killing people?"

The woman nodded. "The energy field. It kills. I know of hundreds of deaths attached to it. I've personally witnessed three caused by the field."

"Such as the field you detected down here," Coop said.

"Yes," she said.

"And you came here anyway," he said.

"That's my job," she said.

"What's your job, exactly?" he asked.

"To find this technology. To figure out how it works. To shut it off. And if I can't do that, to destroy it."

Perkins's eyes widened in shock. She was prone to panic. Or maybe she was already feeling her reaction to the five thousand years news.

Coop had to trust her to translate as best she could, but he couldn't look at her. Not any longer. "Were you going to destroy this base?" He asked the woman.

"As I said," the woman said, "we had just found it. I was excited by the equipment, and the fact that it worked. I hoped we might learn more about your technology."

"Technology." Coop frowned. "All of our technology is killing people throughout the sector?"

"No," the woman said. "Just the energy that radiates from this place. We call it your stealth drive. I gather that's not correct."

So she saw the look Coop had given Perkins when the term was first used.

"We do use the technology to hide the ships, yes," Coop said, not willing to lie to this woman, but not wanting to tell her everything.

"Why would you need to hide them down here?" Bridge asked.

This time, his question was clear. Or maybe Coop was just getting used to his terrible accent.

But Coop chose to ignore him. If the woman was in charge, then Coop would talk to the woman.

"I don't understand," Coop said. "How does the technology kill people?"

She sighed, then looked at her hands. She turned to Perkins and said something. Perkins nodded and said to Coop, "She wants to tell a story. I'm not going to translate word for word, but I'm going to wait until she's done and then tell you as best I can."

Coop nodded.

The woman spoke for about five minutes, her voice rising and falling. As emotions crossed her face, she looked down or turned away. Bridge watched her, clearly as fascinated as Coop. Perkins's attention was divided between the woman and the translation coming through the computer. Her intense concentration seemed to cause her to miss the emotions flowing through the woman's body.

But Coop saw them all. He saw fear and deep sorrow. He saw loss and loneliness. He saw anger, anger so intense that the woman's entire body tensed as she spoke of it. By the end of her tale, she had calmed herself again.

But Coop knew now what drove her. Rage, fueled by a catastrophic loss. He didn't know what kind of loss and he didn't know what, exactly, had made her angry, but he did know that those emotions were what moved her forward, what got her through the day.

Finally, the woman stopped. She nodded at Perkins.

Perkins took a deep breath.

"Let's hope I get this right," she said.

"Do your best," Coop said.

"There is a place in this sector called something like the Room of the Missing Spirits. Or the Place of the Lost Ghosts. I'm not certain of the exact translation." Perkins glanced at Bridge. He didn't help her. Maybe he didn't know those words in Coop's language. Maybe it was one of those concepts that didn't translate well.

"She thinks it's an abandoned space station," Perkins said. "It's been there from the beginning of recorded history in this sector."

Coop's cheeks warmed. Starbase Kappa was in this sector, and it was older than Venice City.

"This place has a low grade version of the energy signature that is here on Wyr. She went there as a child with her family. Her mother died there, becoming one of the ghosts."

Coop looked at the woman. She was studying him, as if gauging his reaction. He wondered if she understood more of the language than she could speak.

Probably. That was his experience with other languages. He could understand some of them and couldn't speak them at all.

Perkins continued with the woman's story.

"She was very young when her mother died. Decades later, she encountered the same kind of energy in an abandoned Dignity Vessel that she was exploring. Only she didn't realize that the energy was the same until after one of her crew died. She lost another friend when he went exploring the Room of the Missing Spirits. Now she has made it her mission to find this energy and prevent it from killing anyone else."

That was a much shorter version of what the woman said.

"You're sure that's all?" Coop said.

"She used names and dates," Perkins said. "I felt they weren't as necessary."

Coop nodded. He hoped he would be able to hear the woman's unadulterated version some day.

"How come the energy has killed her mother and her friend but not her?" he asked. "Did they go to the wrong spot?"

Perkins translated the question.

The woman glanced at Bridge, who looked upset. He said something that sounded negative, but the woman shrugged and turned back to Perkins, speaking slowly again.

"Apparently, most people who enter the energy field die," Perkins said. "But some people are immune. It would take some hefty translation work for me to understand why. She's using some pretty specialized terms here."

"She's one of the people who can survive in the field," Coop said.

"I guess so," Perkins said.

"Ask her," Coop snapped.

"Yes," the woman said before Perkins could ask. Then the woman pointed to herself and then to Bridge. She swept her hands out, then held up five fingers, probably indicating the others in her group.

Explorers. Scientists. People with an ability to survive that others didn't have.

That was the dynamic of the group. They weren't military. They were thrown together for a common purpose. Which explained Bridge's behavior. He was in charge of things elsewhere and not used to taking orders, although he was trying.

Coop looked at the woman, this Boss. He said, "We're going to figure out what's gone wrong with the equipment. We'll stop it from killing your friends."

She frowned, then glanced at Perkins, who translated.

The woman spoke. Coop didn't understand a single word.

"What about your problem?" Perkins translated.

Meaning, what about you being stranded five thousand years in the future?

"We have some studying to do," Coop said. "Then we will talk further."

He stood. He wanted the meeting to end. He needed to think about all of these things. He needed to figure out what to do next.

Perkins took them back to the airlock. Coop told her and the guards that they couldn't reveal any aspect of the conversation. Coop stressed that he wasn't sure the others were telling the truth.

The guards looked relieved at that, but Perkins clearly didn't believe him.

He didn't believe it either.

After everyone had left, Coop sat alone in the briefing room. He shut off the wall screens, opaqued the door, and put his head in his hands.

Stranded. Five thousand years from family, friends, the Fleet, his mission, his very life. Stranded. Not drifting, as he had done for fifteen days, but stuck in a new place, a place that didn't remember much about his people, a place that didn't even speak the same language.

He had the training to deal with parts of this. He had been taught to go into a new culture, to understand it, and to use that understanding for the betterment of the Fleet and the culture itself.

But the Fleet was gone. It was now the ship. The *Ivoire* and its crew of five hundred. Five hundred people, who would feel exactly what he was feeling. Lost. Abandoned. Trapped. Helpless.

It took him nearly an hour to realize he had accepted the woman's version.

He stood, ran his hand through his hair, and went to the bridge. He finally knew what he had to do.

He sent the scientists to confirm what the woman had said. They had to test the equipment, test the *anacapa* drive, figure out the age of the repair room itself, as if it were an alien place.

He sent a small team through the corridors in environmental suits, figuring if most of the others couldn't come in here, his people couldn't go out there. But that was wrong.

They could and did go through the corridors, most of them unfamiliar and unmapped. They used handhelds to figure out where the city was—Coop didn't want them interacting with the locals, not yet—and how long it had been there.

He sent Yash to investigate the base's *anacapa* drive.

It was malfunctioning and it had been blowing holes in the surface for a very long time. Energy would back up in the system and come out sideways, making the holes unpredictable.

It took very little to repair that problem. But, Yash said, the problems with the *anacapa* drive meant that it could have brought them to the right place at the wrong time. They were stranded, and there was absolutely nothing Coop could do about it.

After nearly a week, he asked the woman to meet him in the repair room. He asked her to come alone. He carried a handheld with Perkins' language program downloaded, so that he could get at least a partial translation of the woman's words. He had been studying her language as well. He had a hunch it would be his language in the future.

He waited for her just outside the ship.

This was his first time out of the *Ivoire* since it had returned to Sector Base V. The air was chilly and it smelled metallic, as always. The particles brushed his skin as they fell around him, gentle and soft.

He wore a pair of black pants and a short-sleeved black shirt, with black boots. He had decided against a uniform.

He wanted her to take him to the surface.

She came alone. She didn't ask how he was. She could tell. She would have guessed that he had done his research, and had confirmed much of what she told him. He knew now that she had told him the truth.

Perkins had already asked her to take him to the surface. She had warned him that no one knew that the ship existed. He would have to pass himself off as part of her crew.

He didn't mind. He needed to know what he was facing.

The woman came up to him and stopped. She gave him a rueful smile. "I'm sorry," she said in his language.

He wanted to say that he was fine, that it didn't matter. He was the commander of the *Ivoire*, one of the best ships in the Fleet, and, as such, he could help her with her problem, shutting down the energy leaks all over the sector.

But he didn't say that. He would tell her that eventually, but he wasn't that strong. He wasn't fine. "Thank you," he said in her language.

She slipped a hand through his arm, a gesture he had never seen from her, not in all the time he had observed her.

He put his hand over hers. She looked up at him.

"What do I call you?" he asked in her language.

She paused for a moment. Then she leaned her head on his shoulder just briefly before answering.

"Friend," she said in his language. "I am your friend."

Friend. It was a beginning.

"Friend," he said to her. "I like that very much."

Then they walked through the repair room doors, into the corridor, heading to the surface, to a place Coop had never seen before, a place he had been as a child, as a young man. A place he had once known and a place he had to learn anew.

They walked, and with each step, Coop felt his mission changing. He would represent the Fleet here, in this place.

Once he understood it. Once he knew exactly how he and his new friends fit in. O

Kij Johnson's most recent story in *Asimov's*, "26 Monkeys, Also The Abyss" (July 2008), won the 2009 World Fantasy Award. She has also won the Nebula, Theodore Sturgeon, and Crawford Awards, and she is a current finalist for the Hugo Award. Kij is associate director for The Center for the Study of Science Fiction, and vice chair for the Clarion West Writers' Workshop. Her refreshing new short story explores life's potential while revitalizing us with all the . . .

NAMES FOR WATER

Kij Johnson

Hala is running for class when her cell phone rings. She slows to take it from her pocket, glances at the screen: UNKNOWN CALLER. It rings again. She does not pick up calls when she doesn't know who it is, but this time she hits TALK, not sure what's different, except that she is late for a class she dreads, and this call delays the moment when she must sit down and be overwhelmed.

"Hello," she says.

No one speaks. There is only the white noise that is always in the background of her cell phone calls. It could be the result of a flaw in the tiny cheap speaker but is probably microwaves, though she likes to imagine sometimes it is the whisper of air molecules across all the thousands of miles between two people.

The hiss in her ear: she walks across the commons of the Engineering building, a high-ceilinged room crowded with students shaking water from their jackets and umbrellas. Some look as overwhelmed as she feels. It is nearly finals and they are probably not sleeping any more than she is.

Beyond the glass wall it is raining. Cars pass on Loughlin Street, across the wet lawn. Water sprays from their wheels.

Her schoolwork is not going well. It is her third year toward an engineering degree, but just now that seems an unreachable goal. The science is simple enough, but the mathematics has been hard, and she is losing herself in the tricky mazes of Complex Variables. She thinks of dropping the class and switching her major to something simpler, but if she doesn't become an engineer what will she do instead?

"This is Hala," she says, her voice sharper. "Who is this?" This is the last thing she needs right now: a forgotten phone in a backpack, crushed against a textbook and accidentally speed-dialing her; or worse, someone's idea of a prank. She listens for breathing but hears only the constant hiss. No, it is not quite steady, or perhaps she has never before listened carefully. It changes, grows louder and softer like traffic passing, as though someone has dropped a phone onto the sidewalk of a busy street.

She wonders about the street, if it is a real street—where in the city it is, what

cars and buses and bicycles travel it. Or it might be in another city, somewhere distant and fabulous. Mumbai. Tokyo. Wellington. Santiago. The names are like charms that summon unknown places, unfamiliar smells, the tastes of new foods.

Class time. Students pool in the classroom doorways and push through. She should join them, find a seat, turn on her laptop; but she is reluctant to let go of this strange moment for something so prosaic. She puts down her bag and holds the phone closer.

The sound in her ear ebbs and flows. No, it is not a street. The cell phone is a shell held to her ear, and she knows with the logic of dreams or exhaustion that it is *water* she hears: surf rolling against a beach, an ocean perhaps. No one speaks or breathes into the phone because it is the water itself that speaks to her.

She said to it, "The Pacific Ocean." It is the ocean closest to her, the one she knows best. It pounds against the coast an hour from the university. On weekends back when school was not so hard, she walked through the thick-leaved plants that grew on its cliffs. The waves threw themselves against the rocks, and burst into spray that made the air taste of salt and ozone. Looking west at dusk, the Pacific seemed endless, but it was not: six thousand miles to the nearest land; ninety million miles to the sun as it dropped below the horizon; and beyond that, to the first star, a vast—but measurable—distance.

Hala likes the sudden idea that if she calls the water by its right name, it will speak in more than this hiss. "The Atlantic Ocean," she says. She imagines waters deep with fish, floored with eyeless crabs and abandoned telecommunication cables. "The Arctic. The Indian Ocean." Ice blue as turquoise. Water like sapphires.

The waves keep their counsel. She has not named them properly.

She speaks the names of seas: the Mediterranean, the Baltic, the Great Bight of Australia, the Red and Black and Dead Seas. They are an incantation filled with the rumble of great ships and the silence of corals and anemones.

When these do not work, she speaks the words for such lakes as she remembers. "Superior. Victoria. Titicaca." They have waves, as well. Water brushes their shores, pushed by winds more than the moon's inconstant face. Birds rise at dusk from the rushes along shoreline marshes and return at dawn; eagles ride the thermals above basalt cliffs, and watch for fish. "Baikal. The Great Bear. Malawi."

The halls are empty now. Perhaps she is wrong about what sort of water it is, and so she tries other words. Streams, brooks, kills, runs, rills: water summoned by gravity, coaxed or seduced or forced from one place to the next. An estuary. Ponds and pools. Snow and steam. "Cumulus," she says, and thinks of the clouds mounding over Kansas on summer afternoons. "Stratus. Altostratus." Typhoons, waterspouts. There is so much water, so many possibilities, but even if she knew the names of each raindrop, and every word in every language for ice, she would be wrong. It is not these things.

She remembers the sleet that cakes on her car's windshield when she visits her parents in Wisconsin in winter. A stream she remembers from when she was a child, minnows shining uncatchable just under the surface. The Mississippi, broad as a lake where it passes St. Louis; in August, it is the color of café au lait and smells of mud and diesel exhaust. Hoarfrost coats a century-old farm-house window in starbursts. Bathtubs fill with blue-tinted bubbles that smell of lavender. These are real things, but they are wrong. They are not names but memories.

It is not the water of the world, she thinks. It is perhaps the water of dreams. "Memory," she says, naming a hidden ocean of the heart. "Longing, death, joy." The sound in her ear changes a little, as though the wind in that distant place has grown stronger or the tide has turned, but it is still not enough. "The womb. Love. Hope." She repeats, "Hope, hope," until it becomes a sound without meaning.

It is not the water of this world, she thinks.

This is the truth. It is water rolling against an ocean's sandy shore, but it is alien sand on another world, impossibly distant. It is unknown, unknowable, a riddle she will never answer, in a foreign tongue she will never hear.

It is also an illusion brought on by exhaustion. She knows the sound is just white noise; she's known that all along. But she wanted it to mean something—enough that she was willing to pretend to herself, because just now she needs a charm against the sense that she is drowning in schoolwork and uncertainty about her future.

Tears burn her eyes, a ridiculous response. "Fine," she says, like a hurt child; "You're not even there." She presses END and the phone goes silent, a shell of dead plastic filled with circuit boards. It is empty.

Complex Variables. She'll never understand today's lesson after coming in ten minutes late. She shoulders her bag to leave the building. She forgot her umbrella, so she'll be soaked before she gets to the bus. She leans forward hoping her hair will shield her face, and steps out into the rain.

The bus she just misses drives through a puddle and the splash is an elegant complex shape, a high-order Bézier curve. The rain whispers on the lawn, chatters in the gutters and drains.

The oceans of the heart.

She finds UNKNOWN CALLER in her call history and presses TALK. The phone rings once, twice. Someone—something—picks up.

"Hala," she says to the hiss of cosmic microwaves, of space. "Your name is Hala."

"Hala," a voice says very loud and close. It is the unsuppressed echo common to local calls. She knows this. But she also knows it is real, a voice from a place unimaginably distant, but attainable. It is the future.

She will pass Complex Variables with a C+. She will change her major to physics, graduate, and go to grad school to study astrophysics. Seven years from now, as part of her dissertation, she will write a program that searches the data that will come from the Webb telescope, which will have been launched in 2014. Eleven years and six months from now, her team of five will discover water's fingerprint splashed across the results matrix from a planet circling Beta Leonis, fifty light years away: a star ignored for decades because of its type. The presence of phyllosilicates will indicate that the water is liquid. Eighteen months later, their results will be verified.

One hundred and forty-six years from now, the first men and women will stand on the planet circling Beta Leonis, and they will name the ocean Hala.

Hala doesn't know this. But she snaps the phone shut and runs for class. ○

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Mike Resnick's moving and funny tale of "The Bride of Frankenstein" (December 2009) is a current finalist for the Hugo Award. In addition, Mike has won five Hugos and has had an astounding total of thirty-four Hugo nominations—most of which have been for stories that appeared in Asimov's. His latest novel, *The Buntline Special*, will be coming from Pyr this winter. While Mike's new tale for us is in part a nostalgic nod to the past, it is also a stark look at what could lie ahead if certain issues aren't resolved during . . .

THE INCARCERATION OF CAPTAIN NEBULA

Mike Resnick

I am Captain Nebula, and the fate of the galaxy rests solely on my shoulders. It is an awesome burden, but it is mine and I will not shirk it, as I did not shirk it during the cataclysmic battle against the Rylth, or the war against the hideous Malagai. I have been called a hero, but I am just a man doing his duty. If I seem to take extraordinary risks, it is because I can—and because in these perilous times someone must.

I do not know how long I have been incarcerated in this dungeon. Probably I was betrayed by a member of the Alliance, but I cannot bring myself to hold it against him, for like so many others he is weak and the enemy is physically grotesque and intimidating, and will stoop to any means to assure its eventual triumph.

They feed me well here, and thus far I have seen only humans—turncoats, most likely. They give me will-deadening pills which I pretend to take but hide inside my pillow. They encourage me to write my thoughts down, but of course I will tell them nothing that they can use against the Alliance. If they want the position of the fleet or the planetary disposition of our forces, they are going to have to devise more efficient methods of torture than they currently possess. I think it is only a matter of time before Drago sends his hideous lackey Tzandor the Deathbringer here to extract the information he seeks, but they will find that a more difficult task than they can imagine.

Another session with Captain Nebula. We still haven't managed to find out who he is. The FBI has no match for his fingerprints, and thus far his DNA doesn't seem to be on file anywhere.

It is a most unusual case. I was told that he was delivered, unconscious, to the sanitarium, though the reason for his condition remains a mystery. He seems to be physically fit, there is no sign of any trauma or concussion, his blood pressure and other vital signs indicate a man of perhaps thirty-five years in perfect health.

I had hoped his fantasy would be a temporary delusion, and my biggest problem would be to determine the cause of it and prevent it from reoccurring, but he has been here almost two weeks now and he hasn't deviated from it one iota. It is a remarkably consistent fantasy, and the details never vary. Whoever he is, I think he read too many comic books or sci-fi magazines when he was a kid.

I've put him on a combination of thiothixene and paliperidone, but so far it doesn't seem to be helping. I have another session with him scheduled for this afternoon. I think if I can just show him that part of this fantasy is false or illogical—any part—it may be just the breakthrough I need.

—P. B. Weaver, M.D., Ph.D.

They sent a "nurse" to placate me. The fools think I cannot recognize the notorious Zenobia beneath her white linens, and with her flaming red hair dyed a dull brown. I could easily dispatch her, but then there are the guards on the other side of the door. I have no fear of death, so if I should find out that all they possess are atomic blasters I will take my chances and charge them—but I have information that cannot fall into Drago's hands. Until I know for certain that they are not armed with psychic extractors that can read my innermost secrets even after death, I cannot risk it unless escape is certain.

I have been in worse situations. Let them gloat now. Their days are numbered.

Dr. Weaver: How are you feeling today?

Captain Nebula: I am feeling incarcerated. I assume that comes as no surprise to you.

Dr. Weaver: Have you remembered your name yet?

Captain Nebula: I have never forgotten it.

Dr. Weaver: Surely your parents didn't christen you "Captain."

Captain Nebula: That is my name now, and is the only name I will answer to.

Dr. Weaver: I can respect that, and it is how I will address you. But I need the name on your birth certificate for my records.

(Captain Nebula does not reply.)

Dr. Weaver: It is a small request. Won't you help me out here?

Captain Nebula: If I give you my birth name, you will eventually be able to discover my home planet, and it has suffered enough at the hands of your dark masters.

Dr. Weaver: Can you describe your home planet to me?

Captain Nebula: Certainly not. I might inadvertently mention some feature that helps you to identify it.

Dr. Weaver: All right, I won't ask again. Let's go over how you came to be here one more time.

Captain Nebula: I have told you the same thing every time we've spoken. My description of events will not vary.

Dr. Weaver: Tell me again.

Captain Nebula: We had just fended off another of Drago's attacks in the Polaris Sector when word reached me that Tzandor the Deathbringer was thought to be heading to Earth, a planet which has thus far remained out of the battle. I could not weaken our defenses by taking even a handful of ships to Earth, so I came alone.

Dr. Weaver: Where did you land?

Captain Nebula: If you are not the enemy, you are at least in thrall to him. I will not answer that question.

Dr. Weaver: Why do you suppose your ship has not been found?

Captain Nebula: We have improved our invisibility cloak. It now repels all sensing devices.

Dr. Weaver: And what did you do after you landed?

Captain Nebula: I activated the cloak as I felt myself losing consciousness. I woke up here.

Dr. Weaver: If we should convince you that this Deathbringer character is not on Earth, indeed never landed here, what will you do?

Captain Nebula: You will not convince me of anything. If I determine that Tzandor is not on Earth, I will return to my ship and rejoin the fleet.

Dr. Weaver: How many ships are in your fleet?

Captain Nebula: After the last attack, perhaps seventeen thousand, spread across five Galactic Sectors.

Dr. Weaver: Seventeen thousand? And not a single one has come looking for you. Don't you find that curious?

Captain Nebula: They are under orders to hold their position and defend the Alliance again further attacks. They will not come after me.

Dr. Weaver: They will not come after the fabled Captain Nebula, the galaxy's greatest hero?

Captain Nebula: This is war. No individual's life is more valuable than our ultimate triumph over the enemy. I arrived on my own; I shall escape and return to the fleet on my own.

Dr. Weaver: Can you describe this Drago to me?

Captain Nebula: I call him "he" as a matter of convenience, but Drago the Conqueror is more of an it. He is an oxygen-breathing biped, and that is his sole resemblance to a human being. No one knows where he came from. There are those who say he is actually from Andromeda, but I doubt it. He showed up with his armada while we were still recovering from defeating the Rylth, and within a matter of days he had gained control of the Antares and Bareimus Sectors of the galaxy.

Dr. Weaver: Bareimus?

Captain Nebula: It contains the Parsafal Cluster. He decimated those ships we had there, and by the time we were able to regroup, he controlled almost as much of the galaxy as the Alliance did.

Dr. Weaver: How many races are in your Alliance?

Captain Nebula: I really cannot say. More join us to fight against Drago every day. There were seventy-four when he made his first incursions into the galaxy.

Dr. Weaver: What about this Tzandor? Is he the same race as Drago?

Captain Nebula: I have no idea. No one on our side has ever seen him.

Dr. Weaver: Then how do you know he exists?

Captain Nebula: From enemy prisoners, and captured subspace messages.

Dr. Weaver: Thank you, Captain Nebula. This has been a fascinating discussion.

Captain Nebula: Stop patronizing me. You have not believed a word of it.

Dr. Weaver: I never said that.

Captain Nebula: You didn't have to. It is written all over your face. Ordinarily I would not care what you think, but Drago is real, Tzandor is real, and the threat to your planet and our galaxy is real.

Dr. Weaver: We'll speak again soon, and I promise to be open-minded about it.

Captain Nebula: You are a fool.

Dear Rudolf:

I'm sorry to bother you, but believe it or not, you are the only astronomer I know.

I have a delusional patient here at the Sanitarium who thinks he is some kind of space hero right out of the movies you and I saw as kids, and I am hoping a letter from you, written on the Observatory's stationary, might help me convince him to examine his delusions.

Therefore, can you please answer the following questions for me:

- 1. Is there a section or sector of the galaxy called Bareimus?*
- 2. Is there a star cluster called the Parsafal Cluster?*

3. We have yet to be contacted by a sentient race—I believe that's called the Fermi Paradox? If there are a zillion type G stars in the galaxy and most have planets, why haven't we been contacted? Is it therefore conceivable that there are seventy-four sentient starfaring races of which we know nothing?

4. Is it possible that a being not born on Earth, in this year of 2021 A.D., could convince every medical device we have that he is a member of the human race?

Thanks for your help, Rudolf. Hopefully this will get the ball rolling, because I cannot begin to effect a cure until we disprove at least some of his delusions.

Your friend,

Pete Weaver

P.S. What the hell is a "subspace message"?

Dear Pete:

In answer to the questions you posed:

1. There is no section of the galaxy known as Bareimus, nor is there any star of that name.

2. There is no star cluster known as the Parsafal Cluster, nor is there any star named Parsafal.

3. The odds of seventy-four sentient races co-existing in the galaxy at this moment are astronomical, but then, to be honest, so are the odds of no other sentient races existing at this moment. I find it highly unlikely, and even more unlikely that if they do exist none of them has contacted us.

4. I will state unequivocally that an alien appearing to be identical to a man is an impossibility. By the way, since you have been communicating with him (and I remember from college that you were terrible at foreign languages), you might ask him why he speaks English.

Yours,

Rudy

P.S. A subspace message is an indication that your patient read too much Doc Smith and Edmond Hamilton as a kid.

I am convinced that Weaver is a dupe rather than a turncoat. That is not a great compliment, but it means I won't kill him when I make my escape.

I think they know what I'm planning. I've had these headaches since I first came here, and their frequency and ferocity have increased. My suspicion is they know I am not taking their will-deadening medications, and they are now putting headache-inducing agents in my food.

Well, I went without food for almost three weeks when the Malagai had me imprisoned in the dungeons of Tarmath. I can do it again if need be.

It also occurs to me that when I make my inevitable escape from this place, I cannot go directly to my ship and return to the fleet. The enemy clearly has a foothold on Earth, and I cannot leave it to Drago's tender mercies, which are neither tender nor merciful. I am hesitant about recruiting any locals to help me. They seem a decent if misguided people, and they can't have any idea of the forces that oppose them, or the dangers awaiting them. No, once I am free I shall have to seek out the enemy and somehow find a way to dispatch them single-handedly. It seems an awesome undertaking, but I defeated them on Boganti II and Tarmath and Melipone IV, and I can do it here. I may not survive, but there are things that are more important than Captain Nebula, and freedom from tyranny is first among them.

Memo to Nurse Ralston:

I am seeing absolutely no change in our mysterious spaceman. I think you'd better up his dosage to 500 mg, and go from twice a day to three times.

—Dr. Weaver

She thinks I cannot see through her disguise, that the extra padding in her starched white uniform can hide those curves, but she is mistaken. She is Zenobia, and her presence means that her consort, Tzandor the Deathbringer, is somewhere on Earth, doubtless nearby.

I have to engage her in conversation, play the medicated automaton, and somehow find a way to learn Tzandor's plans from her. Whatever his purpose here, it must be big if it has brought both the Deathbringer and the Pirate Queen to this one location on a small, unimportant planet that is far out on the Spiral Arm.

Except that their presence here means that it is *not* an unimportant planet, and I must learn why.

Dr. Weaver: How are we feeling today?

Captain Nebula: I am feeling fine. I cannot speak for you.

Dr. Weaver: Is the Earth still under attack?

Captain Nebula: The Earth has never been under attack—yet.

Dr. Weaver: That's right. You are here to protect us.

Captain Nebula: If I can. At the very least I am here to assess the situation, and to warn you.

Dr. Weaver: And perhaps lead us against the enemy?

Captain Nebula: Perhaps.

Dr. Weaver: I have asked my friend, the astronomer Rudolf Magnussen, if there has been any unusual activity anywhere in the solar system. He says no.

Captain Nebula: This is the same man who told you I cannot exist?

Dr. Weaver: We know you exist. He questions your origins, not your existence.

Captain Nebula: He is a fool, armored in his ignorance.

Dr. Weaver: Please, let us have no more acrimony.

Captain Nebula: I risk my life to save your planet, you call me a madman or a liar or both, and you want no more acrimony?

Dr. Weaver: I have called you neither, and I will not quote or refer to Rudolf Magnussen again. May we continue?

Captain Nebula: Keep your word about that, and we can continue.

Dr. Weaver: May I assume that English is not your native language?

Captain Nebula: That is correct. I learned it from your radio and video transmissions while I was approaching Earth.

Dr. Weaver: What is your native language?

Captain Nebula: You couldn't pronounce it.

Dr. Weaver: Can you say a few lines in it?

Captain Nebula: Yes I can, and no I won't.

Dr. Weaver: Why not?

Captain Nebula: You are recording this. If Tzandor should get his hands on it, he will know where my home planet is, and will bend every effort to destroy it.

Dr. Weaver: Do you still have family there?

Captain Nebula: Change the subject. I will yield no information about . . . about my home world.

Dr. Weaver: Have you family anywhere else? A wife, perhaps, or children?

Captain Nebula: I did, once.

Dr. Weaver: What happened to them?

Captain Nebula: Drago had them put to death while I was infiltrating his headquarters in the Masprell Sector. It was not a death I would wish on anyone other than Drago and Tzandor. I knew then that I could never take another lifemate, that any woman who is seen in my company is immediately at risk. Perhaps when this campaign is over . . .

Dr. Weaver: What is Drago's purpose?

Captain Nebula: The conquest of the galaxy, of course.

Dr. Weaver: But to what end? The galaxy's a pretty large place. I should think conquering it and administering it are totally different disciplines.

Captain Nebula: He wants to plunder it, not administer it.

Dr. Weaver: I repeat: to what end? Once he rules the galaxy, what else is there?

Captain Nebula: A billion other galaxies. I accessed your history during my approach here. Did Alexander or Genghis Khan or Tamerlaine worry about what they would do after their wars of conquest had ended? For Drago, as for them, conquest is not a means to an end, but an end in itself.

Dr. Weaver: Perhaps the path of least resistance is to lay down your arms, surrender forthwith, and say, in effect, "We're yours. Now feed, house and nurture us."

Captain Nebula: He revels in death, and he takes his sustenance from suffering. I did not become Captain Nebula to surrender to him.

Dr. Weaver: How did you become Captain Nebula?

Captain Nebula: The Rylth enslaved seventeen worlds of the Crab Nebula. Most of our forces were engaged against the Malagai at that time. I was not even a member of our armed forces, I was just a young man who saw something wrong and knew he could not sit idly by. So I landed covertly on the nearest world, destroyed a number of major ammunition

dumps while rallying the people behind me, and then did much the same on world after world.

Dr. Weaver: So that's where you got your name—emancipating the worlds of the Crab Nebula. You're a genuine hero.

Captain Nebula: I'm just a man who saw something terribly wrong and said "This shall not stand."

Dr. Weaver: You make it sound easy.

Captain Nebula: Only if you think three months of privation and torture in the dungeons of Lamark V was easy.

Dr. Weaver: Our medical team found no scars or other signs of torture when they examined you.

Captain Nebula: Our cosmetic surgery is far beyond yours. They would be impossible for you to detect.

Dr. Weaver: You have an answer for everything.

Captain Nebula: Far from it. But I have an answer to every question with which you hope to confirm your belief that I am a liar or a madman, or both.

Memo to Dr. Weaver:

In response to your query, I see no change whatsoever in the patient, which makes me think he is only pretending to take his medications. In fact, I would feel much more comfortable if one of our male attendants accompanied me whenever I must go to his room. I don't like the way he looks at me.

—Nurse Fiona Ralston

I have had four more sessions with Captain Nebula since my last entry here, and to be honest, I will almost hate to see him finally cured. I wish I could eradicate our space hero's delusions while leaving the values that accompany them intact. I realize that nobility and self-sacrifice are somewhat outdated concepts in our modern era, but I can't find anything wrong with them. I'm reminded of when I'd go to the movies as a kid, and the sergeant who was about to storm an enemy position would give a little speech to his men about patriotism and honor and courage and, yes, sacrifice, and we all snickered—but later, when I thought about it, I couldn't figure out why we snickered. Probably because we knew we'd never be able to live up to those ideals.

Captain Nebula is clinically insane, there is no question of it, and I imagine that if we turned him loose he might decide that the mayor and the governor were Drago and his henchman and attempt to kill them, so until he's cured he must remain here . . . but in a non-professional way I shall be sorry to see him become just another man on the street: selfish, lacking compassion, looking for shortcuts.

Today I asked him why, if he's from another star, he cares what happens to Earth. His answer was simple and straightforward.

"If I turn my back on Earth, then why not turn it on every world Drago covets? If I will not save your children from living their lives in bondage, why should I save anyone's, including my own?"

"Have you any children?" I asked. "I thought they were supposed to be dead."

"If I do or if I don't, would either invalidate my answer?" he said, and I had to admit that it wouldn't.

Later I asked him what he planned to do when the war is over.

"I do not expect to survive it," he replied.

"Even though you are Captain Nebula?" I said.

"Precisely because I am Captain Nebula."

I asked what he meant by that.

"It is my job to carry the battle to the enemy, and to be a lightning rod. If I weren't here, he would concentrate his attacks on those who cannot defend themselves as well as I can. If I do not keep showing myself, if I do not remain in the vanguard, then he will be free to concentrate his forces elsewhere. He might even choose Earth."

"Why would you sacrifice your life for Earth?" I asked.

"It is not Earth I would sacrifice myself for, but freedom," he responded.

And I am going to "cure" that. Sometimes I wish I were a ditch digger or a used-car salesman.

—P. B. Weaver, M.D., Ph.D.

They are an essentially decent people, these humans. The nurses seem sincerely interested in helping me recover—not that I have anything to recover from—and this forces even Zenobia to imitate their concern.

As for Dr. Weaver, he remains my primary contact with the world beyond this facility, which calls itself a sanitarium but is a place of incarceration regardless of what it is called. I have asked him to supply me with news of the world beyond these walls, and he has finally supplied me with both the local newspaper and a small television.

The signs of Tzandor's presence are subtle, but they are definite: a jetliner crashes in Argentina, a serial killer murders six women in New York, ten innocent bystanders are killed or wounded in a London bank robbery, terrorists destroy a building in Spain, three young girls are raped in Hong Kong, tribal genocide continues in a small African country. One such incident could be explained, but this many cannot occur by chance, not on a world that can produce such decent men and women as I have encountered during my brief stay here.

Political parties want what is best for the country; why can they not act in harmony? Why do even the announcers on the news channels have such different views of reality, and such acrimony toward those with other opinions? Why do humans make war against their own species?

It must be Tzandor; there can be no other reason for such pointless and unnecessary suffering, such meaningless hatred, and that makes it all the more imperative that I effect an escape before too much longer. The people of Earth are already too accepting of these tragedies, too willing to blame them on chance or anything other than their true cause. They cannot conceive of all this pain, all this senseless tragedy, being the work of a thinking being, and that makes them all the easier for Tzandor to conquer, for they will never acknowledge the existence of such a being until it is too late.

I intuit that I shall die on this forlorn world, far from those I hold dear, but if I can prevent this helpless planet and its innocent populace from falling under Drago's influence, my life will not have been in vain.

I had a long session with Dr. Weaver this morning. He actually brought a number of scientific and astronomical texts with him, as if he thinks they will make me doubt my purpose or my sanity. All of his arguments and his rigorously argued "proofs" mean nothing. I am Captain Nebula, and I am here to save a gritty little people that have no idea that they will soon need salvation.

This case is not doing much for my self-esteem. Far from eradicating his delusions and exposing his fantasies for what they are, he adamantly clings to them, and from time to time I find myself almost wishing that they were true, that there was a decent galactic union composed of sane and compassionate beings, and that there was a Captain Nebula to protect them when they were challenged by threats from villains

whose like exists only in moldering pulp magazines and perhaps Saturday morning serials.

He seems to have taken a dislike to Nurse Ralston, and I am considering transferring her to another ward. I wonder: would I do that for any other patient? Am I accommodating him because I respect him, or because I respect the fantasy of what he is, the noble sentiments coming out of the mouth of a deeply disturbed patient? I truly don't know.

—P. B. Weaver, M.D., Ph.D.

Memo to Nurse Ralston:

I am seeing absolutely no change in Captain Nebula. I'm convinced that he's only pretending to take his medication. I think to be on the safe side it would be best to inject it directly into him; that way there can be no doubt.

—Dr. Weaver

Zenobia has figured out that I am hiding my pills, and today entered my room with a hypodermic needle. I feigned a seizure, which promptly drew a few other staff members, and by the time I allowed them to calm me down, the injection was quite forgotten. But I can't feign a seizure every night. I think I shall have to effect my escape within the next day, because once the enemy forces its will-deadening drugs upon me, I doubt that I will have the ability or even the desire to escape.

I will watch and wait, and when the opportunity presents itself, I will finally take my leave of this dungeon.

Wilson has asked to examine our Captain Nebula. Evidently the entire staff is talking about him. To be honest, I don't know if they are more interested in his bizarre claims or his seeming rationality—but more than one of them has told me that they actually hope I don't cure him, that it would be nice if whatever has caused his idealism was contagious.

Well, I'm having no luck with our space hero, so I think I'll give Wilson a crack at him. I'm off tomorrow, so that's a good time for him to see if he can do any better. I've warned him that while some of the patient's claims are lurid and indeed ridiculous, his stories of the past month have had the most remarkable inner consistency of any delusion I've yet encountered. I've made so little headway—none at all, actually—that I suspect I'll actually be annoyed if Wilson can step in and make any progress.

And, to be honest, I'll miss Captain Nebula. Not the man, of course; I don't even know the man. But the persona who would lay down his life for me, simply because he can.

—P. B. Weaver, M.D., Ph.D.

My God! I leave for one day and we practically have a riot—and we lose a patient!

As it has been reconstructed for me, Nurse Ralston entered our Captain Nebula's room to administer his hypodermic, and he went berserk, grabbing her and trying to beat her senseless. Her screams brought instant help. He made it as far as the corridor when six of the attendants rushed up to subdue him. I am told that he fought like a combination of Bruce Lee and Mike Tyson, hurling huge muscular bodies everywhere, before they finally overcame him. (Four of them are still recuperating from their injuries.)

Wilson was the senior doctor on duty, and he concluded that electric shock therapy was called for. They moved the patient to what we euphemistically call the Therapy Room, strapped him down, and administered the charge—

—and for the first time since the facility opened twenty-three years ago, a patient died in the course of electric shock therapy. There will be a Board of Inquiry to deter-

mine exactly what happened, but there were enough witnesses that I am sure Dr. Wilson will be totally exonerated.

There are those who say Captain Nebula was as crazy as a loon, to use a most unprofessional description, and I can't seriously disagree with them. He was the most difficult case I've encountered in years, and he finally snapped—but I came to respect, not him of course, but what he thought he was.

I'll miss him.

—P. B. Weaver, M.D., Ph.D.

Subspace Transmission:

Drago—

The deed is done, and the last obstacle to our victory in this Sector has been removed. I'd have preferred to keep him incarcerated here, and eventually parade him out before the holocams either as a totally defeated prisoner or a drugged "convert."

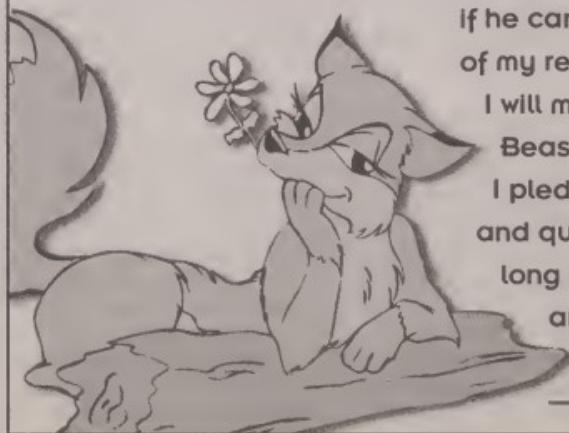
But he was able to identify Zenobia despite her disguise, and I could not take the chance that he might kill her, or worse, force her to admit the truth of his "delusions" in front of witnesses. I have adjusted the record so it will show that as "Dr. Wilson" I gave him a normal, non-lethal charge, and they will eventually conclude that he died of heart failure.

So much for this worthless dirtball. It will offer no resistance now. I will never know what he saw in them or why he thought they were worth defending, a dull, ugly, little race on a dull, ugly, little planet.

I await your orders. Shall I enslave them, or just destroy the planet? The odds are finally in our favor, so set me a more difficult task next time, and woe betide any who stand in my way.

—Tzandor ○

FOXWIFE



I found him, my gentle scholar,
living in a ruined temple.
If he can stand my cooking—
the meat too rare for most—
and my rank smell,
If he can forgive the sight
of my red tail,
I will make him a good wife.
Beast or girl,
I pledge him a warm fire
and quiet for his studies
long into the night,
and any who disturb him
will know my teeth.

—Jane Yolen

TORHEC THE SCULPTOR

Tanith Lee

Two short story collections by Tanith Lee, *Tempting the Gods* and *Hunting the Shadows*, were published last year by Wildside Press. A third, *Sounds and Furies*, was recently released by Norilana Books to coincide with the 2010 World Horror Convention, where Tanith was a guest of honor and where she received a Grand Master of Horror award. Tanith's new tale for us, about the meeting of the world's most uncollectible artist and a rich man who will stop at nothing to possess some of his art, would be a fine addition to the author's next book of short stories.

Beauty must die.

—*The Beast*, Eric Sarusande

It was the thirteenth month and Christmas this year fell on the 23rd of Endember. On Christmas evening Aamon took his favorite mistress, Jacinte, to dinner at his preferred restaurant.

Once they had been seated in the golden half-light—the restaurant maintained a deliberately rustic air—she began to notice how alert and excited he seemed. Was it something he was dying to tell her, or something he was determined to keep to himself?

"You look very tired, Aamon," she therefore perversely said, sipping the champagne. "It's always so nice to see you, but please, never put my pleasures before your own good health."

Aamon smiled, and ate an olive and a chestnut.

He said, "In fact I'm not tired at all. I am wildly elated."

"Mmm?" she asked with an indulgent smile.

"I shan't tell you in here. Wait until we have our coffee on the private terrace."

Aamon van Glanz was a multinaire. He was worth, so far as she knew, uncountable amounts of wealth, mountains of which floated, in several staunch currencies, inside the ghostly spaces of the financial web. Additionally he was quite good-looking, and a tolerable lover. She had been delighted when, three years before, he met her at a theatre party in the Old District, and began to show an interest. He never took up too much of her life; he usually retained five or six women at a time. His gifts to her were excellent, and occasionally savagely expensive.

They ate their leisurely meal, talking of other things. At about 11:30, going out to the private terrace, with its pleasant divans, coffee, liqueurs, chocolates, and a (quite fake)

utterly convincing view of the heavens free of all interference, and alight with slowly wheeling planets and cascades of brilliant rhodium stars, he shut the door and locked it and said to her, "My love, have you ever seen any of the work of the sculptor Torhec?"

Jacinte had not. She had this in common with a great many billion people. Although, in the "civilized" world, most people had *heard* of his work, and certainly knew his name.

"Torhec, of course. But I've never been to one of his exhibitions."

"I'd have thought you might. If not for the preliminary art, for the subsequent violence, at least."

Jacinte looked deliberately vague. Here and there she had experienced—as now—a strange impression Aamon might be getting at her in some obscure, self-amusing, unusually clever way. Which was probably absurd.

"Well," he filled in, "I have. I have been to the very latest show of his, at the Gloewar Gallery. In all I went twice. Once at the opening in November, and again last month, when it ended."

"Was it good?"

"Oh, yes, beloved. Very *very* good. It was superb."

"Which part did you prefer? The sculptures—or . . . the destruction?"

"In an odd way, both. I rather respect what he seems to have said. I can see the point of it."

"But surely," she murmured, "if everyone behaved as Torhec does, or is said to—nothing would be left."

"But that *is* his point. Nothing *is* left, ever, or ultimately can be."

Jacinte pulled an involuntary face and quickly pulled it back to charming creamy sweetness. "Suppose Leonardo da Vinci had thought the same," she added teasingly, wistfully, "or all of the great geniuses. No Leonards then, no Michaelangelos. No Picassos or Kentys or Marlettes—"

"But in the end, the *end*, dear Jassy, those artworks too will be gone. They'll finally rot or crumble, or in the case of Marlette's glass—break. Or, if all else fails to spoil them, they'll melt or fry when the earth at last drops into the sun—or freeze and shatter when the sun goes out—whichever theory one subscribes to. Even the photographs or movies or holograms made of them will be lost." He gestured expansively to the recreation of space beyond the terrace. "Even that wonderful vista out there, and I don't mean just a replica, will one day dissolve into non-being. It *all* gets lost. Even us, or what's left of us. Nothing, ultimately, can remain of *anything*. That is precisely Torhec's point."

Jacinte raised her glass of wine, and stared into the tiny distortion of her mirrored beauty. *And I too? One day I will be old, one day I'll be dead. I must*, thought Jacinte with optimistic revival, *get someone really good—and sane—to paint me, and film me, as soon as I can.*

When she surfaced from this reverie, she grasped quite some time had elapsed. Aamon now seemed only ordinary. His excitement had either been dissipated, or suppressed, and she felt a sharp twist of curiosity after all. He had been going to tell her something? Or only this news of seeing an exhibition, followed by his little lecture on the nature of decay and transience. Reluctantly, at last she said, "But what was the secret you were going to reveal to me, Aamon?"

He seemed bemused. "Was I? I wonder what I meant? There's nothing, Jassy . . . Unless, perhaps, this," he concluded, placing before her the gift box in which lay a flawless diamond choker.

To return to his second visit to the Gloewar, multi-rich Aamon had easily acquired a ticket. And though there were always crowds both at the opening and the close of a

Torhec exhibition, Aamon was positioned on a plush chair in the front row, accompanied only by his bodyguard, Brack. Like everyone else they were then issued with goggles; others had requested and received full-face, head- and/or body-shields. Twice, before such precautions had been put in place, people in the audience were wounded at the climax of the show.

Torhec, however, had entered the room clad only in shirt and pants, the shirt-sleeves rolled up almost to his shoulders to reveal the muscular arms of a dedicated sculptor. His feet, large yet shapely, were quite bare, and nothing protected his valuable eyes at all. That too was, perhaps, in keeping with his beliefs.

His eyes, this way readily visible, were large and of a deep brown. His hair, thick and very dark, was complemented by his long eyebrows, and the short, trimmed, dense moustache and beard which inked in his jaw and uncompromising mouth. In build he was stocky and tall, evidently immensely strong, his skin brown and here and there lightly scarred, most noticeably on his right cheekbone. His hands, like his feet, were large but beautiful, his most handsome features other than his eyes.

Glancing once at the audience, he lifted his right hand in a polite and peaceful gesture that was also incredibly dismissive. It had one extra quality: it seemed to draw across the huge room, dividing himself and his creations from all else, a transparent wall of damage-proof glass. Naturally this was not to protect anyone. It was merely to distance and keep others out. Aamon had heard, in fact, that several times at early displays of this "closing ceremony"—as the media had lately come to call it—mad-dened enthusiasts had rushed forward, attempting to prevent the final act. Gallery police had stopped these interventions, but clearly Torhec had perfected an added precaution of psychic room-division. It was a sort of magic, and no doubt he placed his faith in it. Certainly that evening it worked. No one rose to object. Only a few cries rang out at the commencing carnage. Then there was total quiet, but for the blows and their results, and occasional involuntary human noises—a cough, a grunt—and afterwards, when all had been done, hearty applause. Aamon had not joined in either outcry or congratulation. He preserved, as did the seven-foot, stoical Brack (and Torhec himself), utter silence throughout.

Behind the non-actual glass shutter, Torhec at first paused briefly. Various people claimed he did this in order to bid grim or fond farewell to the fruits of his talent. Torhec himself had never, in any interview or other communication, endorsed this theory.

Aamon marked the little lacuna. It took, he noted, less than fifteen seconds.

Then Torhec picked up the hammer from the bench.

In size it was substantial, made of sustainable oak, and steel. He hefted it without effort, strong as a bull, high above his raven head.

Originally the works had been ranged all across the room, and some too were displayed in an annex, where a fountain played. Prior to the "closing ceremony" each one had been carefully relocated to half of the room Torhec now occupied. Accordingly they presented a rather muddled crowd of items. (No one who had not previously visited the exhibition would, today, have been able to tell much about them. Approximately one third of the audience comprised just such people. They were only interested in the endgame.)

The statues and statuettes were of differing materials. Some were hewn from stone, some made of plaster; here and there rose a marble form, and there were two of wood. None stood taller than four feet. They were mostly human in type, of both genders, abstractly clothed or naked, but there were too a group of slender, plant-like creations twisted among their own branches, and a single obelisk in reddish burnished stone. Aamon, who *had* visited the exhibition previously, had then examined each of the pieces with great attention. He had seen each was abundant in the most exquisite detail. All were graceful to an almost supernatural degree, and beautiful, a

few in curious, nearly sinister ways—critics had tried to explain them, unavoidably, perhaps successfully, or not. Aamon did not try to explain, even to himself. His victorious life had not been founded on explanations. No sketch, photograph, video, or hologram had ever been permitted of the works of Torhec. Only the fading mental pictures could not be prevented; memories. Inevitably, in the majority of cases, they would be faulty, as are, generally, even those of the grieved-for dead.

The hammer smashed home with its blast of demolition, and the initial brief flurry of oaths and shrieks from the audience. A blizzard of broken white and gray exploded up and scattered down. Once begun Torhec did not hesitate. Inside two minutes five of the smaller artworks had been reduced to rubble. These chunks, even the most shapeless ones, the sculptor continued to mash, until they were only crumbs, splinters, dust. He was immensely thorough. It was his policy to be so. All creatures, things, all beauty—perished, and so should this.

Soon the air was thick with whitish fog. Those who had not requested facemasks, or used other improvised protection, coughed in an intermittent strangled undertone.

Eventually only six figures were left. These were the forms carved from wood, the bigger marbles, and the red obelisk.

Torhec laid the hammer aside and took up the first of the group of flasks also ready on the bench. They contained special mixes of corrosive. As he poured them over the last of his work, the audience watched in wonder as wood and stone bubbled and smoked, curling over, melting, flowing down to unidentifiable puddles on the floor. Torhec finalized things with the hammer, bashing to dust any lingering element. (Later cleaners would come to clear the wreckage, sweep away the smoky dirt and suck up the more glutinous remains. These too, where human, were strictly monitored. Machines watched and ultimately frisked them, since not even a fragment of powder might be saved (filched) from this armageddon.)

At the close, the audience started applauding frenziedly. Aamon and Brack were the only persons who did not applaud.

Torhec took little or no notice of any response. He again confronted the chairs, offered them a curt bow. His face was expressionless. He turned briskly and strode out of the room.

When everyone repaired to the cleared annex with the fountain, where tables loaded with alcohol and delicacies attended on the guests, Brack approached one of the gallery's aides and presented Aamon's card for the attention of the management.

Aamon van Glanz met Torhec personally late in December.

The venue now was Aamon's exclusive club on Westnorth Boulevard. In a private coffee-room Aamon had waited—Torhec was rather late—and when the sculptor entered, the entire nut-brown and gilded parlor seemed to shrink and drain of color.

Torhec, that big man who carried himself, Aamon now saw, always with careless ease, sat down facing him.

"I'm late," said Torhec. This statement was the only apology Aamon was to receive. Another then, perhaps, who did not build on explanations.

"So you are. Would you like coffee?"

"I'll take brandy, thank you."

Aamon, who had researched what was known of Torhec's preferences, passed him the bottle.

Torhec had shrugged off his winter coat. Underneath he still wore only shirt and pants, albeit different ones. His feet at least had been ensconced in boots, his hands in heavy gloves before he stripped them.

"It'll be Christmas in less than a month," Aamon remarked. "Do you have plans?"

"Yes," said Torhec. He drank some brandy, thought about it, and swallowed the

contents of the glass bulb. Aamon leant forward and refilled it. Torhec said, "And the reason for this meeting?"

"Aside from the pleasure of contacting one of our foremost artists?" Aamon smiled. "I'd like to commission you."

"Really? I suppose that can be arranged." Torhec seemed not particularly enthused. For two years the public had been clamoring for his skills, in the city, next everywhere in the whole country and beyond. "I'm working," Torhec said, not touching the second dose of brandy, "on some stuff at the moment. And my next exhibition—"

"Is at the Firecrest Halls," supplied Aamon, "in January in the New Year."

"Yes."

"This commission of mine," said Aamon, with a lazy calm he did not at all feel, "is something *slightly* unusual."

"Oh, yes?" Torhec glanced at him. At no time so far had he properly *looked* at Aamon. Torhec seemed more interested in the vast views from the side windows. They were real ones, the vista of the Boulevard stretching for miles, railed in either side by the elegant and glassy buildings, and ending in the vanishing point of a winter sky. The sky too was wonderful, changed to royal purple by the morning lighting, and the city's Climate Control, whose soft wavering rays might sometimes be glimpsed shimmering above like the most self-effacing Northern Lights.

"What I had in mind," said Aamon, "is to commission from you one solitary piece—the subject to be anything you wish, of course, the choice is yours. And the *exhibition*, if so I can call it, would take place in my own house, the one here at the Heights. I expect you know the area."

"I've heard of it," said Torhec. "Very well. If that's what you'd like. When do you want it?"

Aamon thought, *We might as well be arranging a delivery of oranges, or a lawn-cutter. In a moment, he thought, in a combination of rather childish glee and apprehension, I shall wake him up.*

"As soon as you could finish it," was all he said.

"No problem there, then. I have one or two new pieces already done provisionally for January. They won't miss them. If you don't care what you get, you can have one of those. My usual price—"

"We'll come to that," said Aamon. "Rest assured, the remittance will be extremely high, as befits your genius. And, as I've also said, to receive anything of yours will content me utterly. Would tomorrow be possible?"

Torhec abruptly grinned. His teeth were white and strong as the rest of him, as if purposely grown to help him *bite* his sculptures into being. "Why not. *Tonight*, if you like."

"I'd love it. This is splendid."

Torhec reached out, took the second brandy and downed it. He had half begun to get up again, the proffered financial reward seemingly almost immaterial to him, or else something of more import in the offing.

"Just one more thing," said Aamon, soothingly. "Perhaps you might sit down again, if you would. There is an additional matter I must put before you."

"Surely your people can let me know anything else. The payment too. I trust you, Van Glanz. You have a gloriously honest reputation. You've no reason anyway to cheat me. Simply get someone to arrange the details. Aside from that, you're aware of my own method. My work will be yours for one month, or one month and seven days if you want the fullest stretch. Then I shall arrive with my own people and, as always, I'll break everything up. It goes without saying, if you wish to invite guests also to witness that event, I have no objections. My own gang will then remove any debris. Nothing will mar your house or its furnishings, nor will any mote of my work remain."

"Precisely," said Aamon firmly. "Which is why I must enlighten you a little further."

Torhec sat. His face grew blank, and then a scowling concentration fixed it. For the first time he looked fully into Aamon's eyes, a disconcerting gaze, stony, Aamon thought, as any statue's—or a gorgon's. But the rich man was prepared.

"What I want, Torhec, is to retain your work indefinitely. I want it *not* to be broken up, as all your work always is broken up by you. By which you demonstrate the transience of loveliness, and life itself, your elegiac and practical reproof to God, or whatever ghastly supreme force makes and *breaks* all of us, and everything. I understand this, Torhec, and I *salute* it. But I, Torhec, also want to play at God, or at a god, a nicer one, who tries to save something fine from the wreck and give it—if only temporarily—the immortal life it deserves."

"No," said Torhec instantly, hard as a hammer blow.

"Wait," said Aamon, "let me finish. This exquisite work of yours—unknown by me so far, yet obviously exquisite because you have made it—will be kept in a vault of my house. The house at Heights has several such cellars. They are impenetrable, except by myself, or, in rare cases, those machines I prime with my authority. *No one*, Torhec, will have access to, or look at, your masterpiece, save me. I will swear this on or by any means you stipulate. If you wish you may examine all the arrangements. Only I, Torhec, *ever*, will see your work. This single work. I will even, if you wish, limit myself to a certain number of visits to it during any given year. There are ways of ensuring this. And you can check records of my dealings elsewhere. As you yourself have said, I have never reneged on any deal, never broken my word. I am known for that. Only I will ever regard this cherished creation. And, if you like, on my death it can be destroyed—remotely—by a charge laid in the vault." Aamon took one long, slow breath. He added, coolly, "And in return, I'll give you two million reulars."

Torhec's face, which had stayed like rock, now moved. Not only the eyes, but all of it seemed to *blink*.

He said nothing, but he swallowed. Much louder than when he drained the first brandy.

"Don't you think you're worth so much?" Aamon said. "Of course you do. Already you're becoming a wealthy man. But fashions alter, and even great genius may fall from its pedestal. We need only remember Mozart, or Clemorte Iyens. And too there is the unreliability of the world's currencies—always a little dubious now. Except the reular, which as everyone agrees, is the only safe monetary unit left. With two million of them, I'd think, you can do exactly as you please for the rest of your long, long extraordinary and creative life."

"I have been asked for this before. Nine times, and always by the very rich. I have always refused."

"Who offered you two million reulars?" Aamon asked, with the crude finesse of utter truth.

"None. I said, very rich, but not rich in your way, Van Glanz. But really it doesn't matter. My answer is the same. No."

They sat then in silence for a few moments. Aamon was more than aware that, despite the refusal, Torhec had not got up again to leave. Surreptitiously Aamon pressed the small button inside his sleeve that signaled to Brack, waiting in the corridor, that all was well. A sudden protective intrusion might be unhelpful.

Aamon tried to analyze Torhec's bleak and uncommunicative face. The man was staring again from the nearest window, studying perhaps the endless glittering traffic on the Boulevard. Considering?

Finally, Aamon spoke.

"Can I offer you more brandy? Or something else perhaps."

"Aside from your money."

Torhec's tone was oddly bitter.

Wildly Aamon hoped to see in this a chink in the sculptor's granite walls.

"Unfortunately, my only talent is to *make* money. I can't make anything else. Therefore it's all I *can* offer, aside from those necessities and luxuries money provides."

"I remain here," said Torhec, "because you puzzle me. Why do you want a piece of my work so much, if you propose showing it to no one else? What use is it to you? If you boast you have it, while you never reveal it who'll believe you?"

"I told you. I respect your wish to reprimand a destructive God by copying Him. *I* want the role of a god who cherishes."

"You have a stock of treasures, no doubt."

"Some. Those I valued and could get."

"You must rate my work highly," said Torhec. And then—*then* he rose again to his feet. He drew on his coat.

"I have one last suggestion," said Aamon. And he too got up. He was rather shorter than Torhec, as he had known he must be. Next to the other's great hands his own looked like those of a boy of fourteen.

Torhec stood there. "Well?"

"If you will give me your work, in exchange for my two million reulars, I will agree, and under all former conditions as outlined, not only not to show the piece to any other, but *myself* not to look at it. *Never* to look at it. You shall put it in a crate, install a blind of some sort, an anti-X-ray filter to keep the interior of the container unseeable, seal it, lock it, *booby-trap* it if you wish. Ever unseen then, the contents will remain with me until my death, when—as I promised you—it shall be destroyed. And before that day or night it will, to all intents and purposes, remain invisible—non-existent—destroyed, *dead*. Like all your other work. No human eye will be set on it. No hand will touch it. I'll tell no one. Even those professionals who, monetarily, must be involved, will know nothing of the nature of the deal. Only I. I shall only—I shall only *know* it is there."

Torhec's face altered its contours. The most peculiar of smiles had crossed the rock. "Van Glanz," he said, "I believe you are as mad as I am."

The last month came, Endember, the month of the year's dying fire. Next came Christmas, and five days after, the New Year. At certain eras of life, both individual and general, time will move very swiftly. Further years arrived and, with their months and festivals, slid away into history. A fifth December ended, a fifth Endember began, just as always. It was once more Christmas Eve.

Veronise, who by then was the leading favorite among Aamon Van Glanz's seven mistresses, watched him with distinct inquisitiveness, which she did not attempt to disguise.

"You seem very edgy, darling," she said. "Is everything well with you?"

"Everything in my life is splendid, you most of all."

Knowing she had been fobbed off, Veronise gave him her wise-cat's smile.

Later, when they left the ivory-tinted bedroom and went downstairs for supper in the second, dark green, dining room, she was aware whatever it was that excited Aamon had not been quenched by love-making.

She did not question him now. She only went on watching him.

He knew she did this, but her feline gaze had never troubled him.

When they reached the fruits and sweets stage of the meal, he said to her, "Have you ever heard, Vero, of the sculptor, Torhec?"

"Oh yes. I went to one of his shows once. A tiny piece of broken marble hit me in the face. I was only nineteen and I cried. My companion was very angry and afterward he told the officials there that people should be offered facial protection. It didn't scar me though, as you've seen."

Aamon looked at her considerably. He was not amazed her main recollection of the event was that she had been hit by flying debris. It was pointless to ask if she had liked the sculptor's work.

"Five years ago," Aamon said, "I met Torhec."

"He was attractive," said Veronise, "in his own way."

"Perhaps. I thought him a genius. I still think this."

"I knew someone," said Veronise, slyly eating a Chinese peach, "who took a photograph of his statues. But the gallery police confiscated it. He had to pay a fine."

Aamon said, "I asked Torhec to sell me one of his works. I was willing to pay him two million reulars. Providing I could keep the work."

Veronise stopped eating. She raised her eyes and stared luminously right into his.

She thought, *What should I do to make him offer me such a sum? Perhaps it might be possible.*

But she said, "What did he say?"

"He said no," Aamon replied.

"And did he mean it?"

"Oh," said Aamon, "he must have. It was against his principles."

Principles, thought Veronise, *What in God's name are those?*

After a lavish cheese board they drank vitreous thimbles of a rare eastern spiced spirit, and returned to bed, this time in the crimson suite.

During the long winter night-morning, after 3 A.M., Aamon lay awake, his own brain ticking with little mouse-like scurrying thoughts, which, luckily, Veronise (a cat) would neither see nor sense.

He was well aware that he had a recurrent compulsion to tell people, occasionally *anyone*, about the deal he had firstly *wanted* to make, and then *attempted* to make, with Torhec. Needless to add that, once the deal was concluded, that end of December five years before, the urge to reveal it *all* to *anyone* had dogged him like the phantom hound of some preternatural curse.

Of course, despite constant flirtations, he resisted successfully and always. Part of his off-kilter delight in the deal's victory was this nagging joy of wanting to fling wide the doors of the secret and let it loose. But he had given his word. And he never broke his word, never betrayed or reneged. Such integrity was one of the huge pillars of his own personal achievement. He could not now afford to blab. Evidently, in the past, he had, with other things, never been tempted.

As it had been arranged between himself and Torhec, the maneuver was carried out like a kidnapping, or rather, the resolution of one, when the ransom is paid and the victim restored. Aamon had only obeyed the sculptor in this. Torhec had told him, as they sat again in the coffee-room of the exclusive club, exactly how everything must be done. He—Torhec—might have been planning it for days. Had he? Subsequently Aamon asked himself if that could be so. For Torhec might well have coined such a contingency modus operandi. Others after all had tried to buy the longevity of his work from him. If none offered such a succulent remuneration as Aamon, they had still proved that not even a Torhec might be completely free of pestering. (Every man too has his price. Or so they say. Inevitably the type of price may vary, not only in amount but in scope.)

Torhec outlined the procedure in a few cool sentences.

"One of my people will contact you inside the hour—or your agents, if you prefer. You or they will then meet him in person today—the place to be mutually arranged. Somewhere discreet."

"Why . . . yes," Aamon had murmured, docile, almost stunned.

"He will receive your check for the exact sum you've stipulated. Two million reulars."

"A—check—but the usual method of electronic transfer will see the money safely into your account, at any bank or freehouse of your choice, in moments—"

"No. I must insist on a check. Made out by your own hand, and likewise signed. An antiquated format I know, seldom used for over thirty years. But a man of your standing, Van Glanz, should have no difficulty in getting use of it."

"Yes, certainly then. A check. Why not—"

"Once the check is in my possession, the artwork will be brought to you, by a couple of my work gang. Where do you want to take the delivery? At your agent's premises or directly at your house?"

"My—" Aamon broke off. His breath had caught in his throat. He cleared it and said, "My house at the Heights."

"The piece will be invisibly stowed inside an ordinary box, a small wine crate. It won't look like anything at all. And it will also, in accordance with your promise, be X-ray filtered and sealed fast. You've sworn never to look at the piece, and you will be well advised not to try. As you said, you'll know it is there, an example of work by the sculptor Torhec, for the duration of your life. I advise you again now," Torhec added quietly, "never to break your word. *Never* to attempt to look. For your own sake."

His voice was devoid of any menace. It was flat and remote.

Aamon lowered his head. His wrists were trembling. "Thank you," he said.

Then Torhec laughed at him. That was all: a brutal trio of barks.

Torhec rose once more, and walked out of the room, and Aamon touched the hidden button in his sleeve in the summoning signal for Brack. By the time, nine seconds after, that the tall bodyguard entered, Aamon Van Glanz seemed quite composed. Within half an hour one of the most colossal freehouse bankers had been contacted. They had plenty of dealings with the Van Glanz corporation, and within a further twenty minutes everything was in motion.

Before the sun had even crossed behind the last quarter of the climate-controlled over-mantle, the large pale paper check, scrawled with jet-black words and numbers, had been couriered, offered, and accepted. Before the sun's blood-red ball had bounced entirely down under the horizon's edge, a small, stout wine-crate, normally the carriage for a dozen bottles of Fornian Pinot Blonde, had been unloaded in one of the inner halls of the Van Glanz mansion on Westnorth Heights.

Aamon stood alone with it in this hall for nearly an hour. He stood staring at the crate. Once he walked all round it, and then again: only twice.

Obviously it had been sealed tight, and no doubt rigged with anti-tampering devices. It might even maim him or cost him his life should he attempt to open it. Or it would maim or kill anyone he designated to attempt that in his place. As for a machine making the attempt, doubtless that would result in an uncontrolled explosion, causing untold damage and also loss of life. . . . But this did not even come into it. No, the threat of such a punishment was immaterial. He had given his word. And Torhec had trusted him.

Aamon Van Glanz was the only man, the only human on earth, who would now possess an artwork by Torhec the sculptor.

That must be enough.

The case was borne down into one of the lower vaults. In a previous century it had been a bomb-shelter, and was reached by three individual elevators. The first was beautifully decorated, the second plain, and the third ugly, almost gross, and equipped only with a hideous Everlasting, one of the poisonous and dull light bulbs of that earlier period.

Aamon accompanied the porter robot that held the crate. Aamon oversaw its settlement in the long and narrow sub-basement chamber, whose walls were lined in platinum and lead. It sat there on the dark trestle, in the dull dead twilight, and

stared back at him, and for another longish while he stood before it and gazed at its blank and unknowable face.

That night Aamon dreamed he came down in three stages from the mountain, behind Moses, who bore in his strong arms the two mighty tablets of stone on which the Laws of God had been inscribed. But both stones were blank, and Moses' brown eyes like the eyes of Torhec. So Aamon knew neither he, nor any other, would ever dare to ask, let alone try to decipher, the blank mystery of the Laws of God. They would all have to invent them, and even then they would risk both sanity and life by such temerity.

Those five years on, Aamon left the bed in the crimson suite, leaving Veronise, sleeping catlike.

He dressed in the adjacent annex, and went down through the house, got in turn into the three elevators, descending to the vault.

He alone knew the entry code. Even the machine that had first taken the crate there had had that portion of its memory erased.

Everything was just as he recalled. The light, the room, the box. There was no reason any of it should have been altered. But he had not gone back, not once in half a decade since the installation, and somehow he had believed (ridiculously), that some change *must* have occurred. Or he had only hoped so. Hoped that if he abstained from a visit for long enough, at last the wall of the casket might, spontaneously, have given way, and the wondrous prize be lying there naked, *visible*.

But the crate was as he had left it, the relatively germ-free moderated air, soured only by the Everlastings, stable and non-destructive to its material. Even the lettering, that told of twelve bottles of a sable-white wine, was pristine as if just printed on.

Aamon paced about the box. Round and round, far more than twice. He recalled the five-year-old dream, which he considered less blasphemous than crass. He thought of the myth of Pandora, who opened the forbidden box or chest or pitcher and let out all the evils of the world which—ever since—talented humanity had been striving to cram back.

And he thought too of the king in the other myth, with the ears of an ass, and of the barber—or whatever he had been—who had learned the secret and had to tell, in desperation whispering it to the river reeds. But ever after when the wind blew, or if any cut a reed and made a pipe, they sang the secret out loud. Asses' ears, asses' ears. *Asses' ears*.

Shall I tell just one? Aamon asked himself. *Not try to look, no, never that—simply... confide.* But to whom? To that woman upstairs? To some other woman? To a valued employee? To a drunk on the street?

Why did I come down here? I have the damnable thing. That is enough. I swore it would be. It is.

Torhec was by then in some foreign country. He still gave his exhibitions. Was still well-known, feted, scorned, criticized, and adored. Now whole arenas were filled by people on those final days of the armageddons—the “closing ceremonies,” when everything was smashed and melted into crumble and clinker. Huge screens sometimes relayed the proceedings to those outside who had been unable to obtain, or afford, a seat. (The tapes that supplied the screens were always, it went without saying, presently wiped.)

But Torhec would have no need to worry now if ever his prowess waned. A great if eccentric star, he would be safe for the duration of his days, having those riches Aamon had given him. While Aamon himself, of course, had never missed the two million, amid the opulence of his personal fortune.

I have it. I have it. That is enough. There it is. When all the rest is gone, when he has destroyed all of that, this is here with me, while I live. It's mine.

He went back up through the house, and undoing a high window in a lonely room, whispered into the ecologically selective light snow now spinning down through the climate-controlling waves above, "I have a piece by Torhec, *Torhec.*"

Inside eleven further years, Aamon Van Glanz passed from the rank of multinaire. He became a max-multinaire, one of the wealthiest men on the planet.

All that happened without his lifting a finger, accepting a contributory call, scanning an apposite viewer. Without, in a curious manner, his really noticing.

While, in the same way, he began to grow old, also barely noticing.

That is, it crept up on him, his aging. Just as his wealth had done. Two panthers stalking him, the first golden and gleaming, limber and imperious. The second gray, deadly, sad.

That particular Endember, he was at the other, older, northern house, by the sea.

Out in the wilds, there was no Climate Control, except what had been introduced into the building. Heavy snow had fallen, a blazing white even in the gathering dusk, and fringes of the ocean had frozen into a thickly striated weave of ice. Beyond, bluish milk, the water stretched to the matte blue band of vision's end.

Reflected in a fifty-foot high pane of window, Aamon could see his last mistress, Ezessi, calmly knitting a shapeless mass of coppery wool.

"Tomorrow," he said, "I think I'll be returning to the Heights."

She did not pause. "Of course. Shall I come with you?"

"Yes, please do. It's much warmer there—I mean it *looks* much warmer. When I was young, Zess, I used to spend a whole twenty-eight day winter month here, staring out at that view. But now, now . . ." He did not finish.

In the window her reflection glanced up at him, gently, and forbearingly. She was not a vast amount younger than he. Perhaps she understood that, in some incoherent form, he feared the coldness of the landscape, and the sea, might one day trap his ousted soul or personality; he would then wander forever on the frigid shore. He had better be very careful and never die, here.

During the afternoon Aamon had watched Torhec on the WWV. Sometimes Aamon dialed the searcher to find out where the sculptor was, and now and then had been rewarded, if such was the proper phrase, by a handful of minutes broadcast live from one of Torhec's "closing ceremonies." These were the things everyone always wanted to see, although the briefest whirl of images from the latest exhibited and doomed works (under contract all footage to be destroyed less than ten seconds following the hammer blow) flashed by, before the mayhem began.

Torhec too had grown older through the years. He appeared, unsurprisingly, well-off. Yet he was still, both physically and psychically, a carelessly powerful man. A little thickening at the waist, a slight laxness of facial muscle. They did not detract, would only have been truly notable to such a connoisseur as Aamon Van Glanz. The sculptor's eyes stayed dark and focused. His dark hair merely had been seeded, like the northern ocean, with ice. There was a small thin scar on his other cheek. But his hands carried no spots of age. They remained huge, fine, and lethally capable.

By then, that afternoon, Aamon was so used to watching Torhec's destructions they had, Aamon believed, slight effect on him. He had never, after the initial visit, gone to any other of the exhibitions.

Ezessi and he dined in the closed dining room, which had no windows, and which played its human occupants Bach. After this they went to their separate beds. It was Ezessi's company he relished now the most. Should he feel any other need it was more easily satisfied alone. And that mostly to please his physician, who had assured him sexual release was good for him in moderation.

The next day he and she flew out through a white blanket of weather and into a

dark, bony evening. By 4 P.M. they were in the mansion at Heights. Real logs burned in the grates. All the lamps were lit.

"Zess," he said, countless times, always instantly breaking off and changing the subject.

When dinner was done she said to him, "What's troubling you, Aamon, my dear?"

He had never known with any of his women how sincere they were—generally his common sense had told him: not very. But Ezessi had this unusual sibylline calm. She was very nearly as serene as an icon.

Aamon poured them another *aprés-fin* and sat down in his chair.

"Some years ago," he said, looking only into the shallow tulip of green liqueur, "I bought a piece of art from Torhec. You know who I mean by Torhec?"

"Yes, my dear. You've told me about him. We've often watched him on the world wide view. In fact, just yesterday, we did so."

"I hadn't forgotten, Zess."

"Did I say you had, Aamon?"

"The point is—I *kept* the work I bought from him. I *kept* it." He added, as if to the drink alone, "*Kept it.*"

"So he didn't destroy it, as apparently he always must."

"No, Zess. I persuaded him. We did a deal. But I swore I'd tell no one. Now I have. You." Aamon waited. She said nothing. Her serene face lured him on. "And anyway, the core of our agreement was that I was *never* to look at the artwork he'd given me. I never saw it before either. He sealed it in a crate. I suggested it could be booby-trapped. It's been here, under this house, ever since. About two miles down."

"In the old bomb-shelter."

"An iota lower than that."

"It seems, Aamon, not unreasonable."

"What do you mean? Of course it's *madness*. To have bought it—and never—*seen it.*"

"Did you never before," she mildly inquired, "buy something that you did not see?"

"Stocks—economic portals—items of my so-called financial empire. Yes, those. Houses even. This house I bought through an agent, and never bothered to view the report. But such things—in any case, I did eventually *see* them all, or the results they brought. But the work of art Torhec sold me—sight unseen and never seen. I think now I really must. Tonight. It will be now."

She appeared to be studying him attentively.

At last she said, "What about the booby-trap?"

"Oh," he said plaintively. "I sent an expert team in while we were in the north. They checked the crate by machine. Then two volunteers personally tested it. It seems, rather strangely, they're often asked to carry out such services, test the opening of things without themselves actually breaking the vessel undone. Once or twice members of the team have died, doing such work, but their dependents are always excessively compensated. Besides, they have assured me, Torhec's crate is locked only with an ordinary electrolock. There are no devices at all rigged on or inside it. There's only the filter, of course, to prevent anyone seeing its interior through an X-ray camera or similar intrusion."

Aamon paced about the room. "I could have undone the thing and looked at it at any time during all these—what is it?—fifteen, sixteen years. The very day after he sent it to me. That night. I could have looked then. I never did."

"Why not?" Her voice was like his own inner voice. It had asked him too: *Why not?*

As he had answered himself, he answered her. "I'd sworn not to. I don't break my word. Never have. I'm *famous* for this. But that wasn't the reason."

"What was?"

"I don't know. Not fully. Why I *didn't* look, why I *must* look now."

He had reached one of the windows of the house at Heights, and gazed down on the glittering firefly heap of the city so far below. On to this view her reflection was not projected, nor really his.

Softly he heard her ask, "Aamon, are you ill?"

"Oh—no. No, not at all—not yet. But I suppose—getting old has something to do with this. Because he—Torhec—is like *God*. He creates and mercilessly destroys. I have to have some kind of *answer*—even though I don't know what the answer is, or even if there can *be* an answer."

She said, "Torhec only reminds me of that priest who sponsored the burning of great works of art during the Renaissance in Italy. I think his name was Savonarola. He called the destruction the *Bonfire of the Vanities*."

But Aamon had barely heard her finally. He did not see the room, or his reflection, or the city outside. Already, mentally, he was in the first elevator, traveling smoothly down into the abyss below.

Above him, on the ceiling of that first elevator, when physically he reached it, was painted a sunshined summery sky. Never before had this struck him as incongruous; no doubt he had not been paying attention. Oddly, now his concentration seemed fixed like steel elsewhere, he did take in everything rather sharply. For example the swift glide of the first lift's motion down, and the somewhat slower gait of the second. The third and last went extremely quickly. It made his stomach churn a moment, or that was only perhaps his nerves.

Once in the under-room, bathed in the awful Everlasting light, Aamon approached the box rapidly. Those others, sanctioned by him, frisked by the new bodyguard, Slait, monitored by robots, had used the lifts and entered here not long ago, to perform their tests. But even now the space seemed undisturbed, and on the side of the crate, black as if just applied, the spurious identity: *Pinot Blonde (Zibeline Blanche) 12*.

A suitable key to the electrolock had already been extrapolated from the lock template, fashioned, and left for Aamon's collection in a robotic safe that would reply only to his thumbprint. Now it did so, its mindless penetrating eye gleaming.

For a second then, holding the key, he faltered. He was not afraid, he discovered, not excited. He was anxious, and—deeply unhappy. Oh, not because of any guilt, not because he broke his oath. Be damned to that. He was allowed, surely, one blot on his inconsequential virtue. What was it then? Standing with the key, which winked its own wicked little white light, leaden sorrow washed through him.

He would be disappointed, that must be it. He was having a premonition of seeing, in the opened crate, some unimportant work Torhec had palmed off on a rich idiot. Or of abruptly realizing, after all the years of spellbound recollection, that after all Torhec was now hopelessly behind the times, or—worse—had never been any good. In the box then would be an inferior lump of rubbish, retained so long, and in such mesmeric captivity. As if Aamon had bravely swarmed the castle of the Sleeping Beauty, only to find an unexceptional if rather coarse female, snoring, or more repugnantly *waking up*, and reaching out demanding hands.

Aamon shrugged off the weight of all this, the unease, the superstition, and his grief.

With due care he applied the key to the lock.

Which gave a caustic little click.

Perhaps, despite everything, the crate would now explode.

But the crate did not do anything save give the slightest quiver. The near side of it slipped about a quarter of an inch out of the securing groove. It was open. From the

narrow line of darkness, caused mostly by the X-ray-deterring filter, came a faint walnuttty smell, and a whisper of the filmiest particles—dust.

Then he felt he could not move. Then, unavoidably, he moved.

Aamon Van Glanz wrenched out the side panel of Pandora's Box (wood splintered, the filter cracked), and the drizzle of the miserly Everlasting light soaked in.

Staring at his revelation, the max-multinaire said—thought—nothing. Only after a while he burst into a bellowing shout. When the shout ended, once again he stood entranced. It was very likely another hour before he leant forward and reached inside the crate.

Aamon woke Ezessi in the long winter night. He did this with apology, and a bottle of vintage champagne the color of mercury. She knew it was not sex he required. Those nights had passed.

"My dear, what is it?"

"Oh. It's victory, Zess." She waited. He said, "For something."

They drank the first glass. There was plenty. It was a jeroboam.

"I went," he said, "to the crate. I opened it."

"Yes," she murmured when he stopped, as if seeming to wait for her avowal of remembering. And next, when again he seemed to await her prompt, "And what was there? Was it—beautiful?"

"Yes, it was quite beautiful, in its own terrible, horrible, cruel, and heartless way."

"He had—" even she hesitated, "he had somehow arranged that it be destroyed when you undid the crate?"

"No, my love. He'd destroyed it even before it went *into* the crate. He knew—he must have known—he knew what I did *not* know then—that one day I must *look*. Such was his power over me. And so he arranged it that, if I should look, I would find only the destruction. Demonstrably, if I'd kept my bloody word, I would never have known what lay inside the box. I could have retained my peerless illusion instead that I possessed one isolated masterpiece which had survived his onslaught."

They drank a second glass, very slowly.

He asked her, "Aren't you curious as to what it might have been? I mean, what the rubble amounted to—powdered stone, or chips of wood, or the stain of acid."

"Please tell me, Aamon," she said, patiently.

Now he felt himself so alone, Aamon did not find her patience either irritating or consoling.

As if randomly he said, "It occurred at once to me that I do in fact possess one of Torhec's masterpieces, since I have the *remains* of something he destroyed. Normally every bit is cleared away, disposed of. But for this he'll have worn gloves. Or even—my God—even made someone else complete the job. Yes. That's what he'd do. So not a print, not a trace of DNA is there. Nothing of his. Nothing. Yet too I know this thing, even in its ruin. Frankly it wasn't really his, though it would have been. I'd seen it once. Sixteen years ago. He hadn't made it."

She watched him. Was she startled? Aamon closed his eyes. He continued. "They're unusual, of course. But I've used them, here and there. It was my check to him, you see. The check that paid him for his work. Torn into two million pieces, one for each of the reulars—or so it looked. That's what was in the crate." Observing him now, Ezessi saw his face had voided all expression. How empty he seemed. His was a mask she had glimpsed occasionally on the WWV, the face of a man whose skull had been smashed, still alive yet lobotomized, feeling nothing, and never to feel much ever again. He put down his glass and said, in a sort of clockwork voice, "One day Torhec himself will vanish. Like all of us. They'll find *his* debris. It will be laughing. He, if none of the rest of us, has understood the joke." O

Don D'Ammassa is the author of seven novels and three reference books and over 100 short stories split evenly between science fiction and horror. He lives in Rhode Island with his wife, two cats, and 55,000 books. Don's last story for Asimov's, "Curing Agent," appeared in our July 2003 issue. He returns to our pages with a poignant tale about why, for some love stories, there is . . .

NO DISTANCE TOO GREAT

Don D'Ammassa

The sky went on forever. Once upon a time, that might have been a figure of speech, but today, for Jason Tallant and his companions, it was literally true. Except that it wasn't really the sky, even though it was blue, sort of, and speckled with clouds, sort of. What he was actually seeing was the way in which his mind interpreted part of the external reality of the hyperspatial plane. Which really was a plain, in both senses—and spellings—of the word.

The interstellar transport *Rollaway* had stopped briefly to allow its passengers to enjoy the panoramic view. The retractable-wheeled vehicle was perched on the top of a comparatively steep and completely featureless hill, overlooking what might almost have been a river valley, except there were no rivers in hyperspace, which meant it wasn't properly speaking a valley either. The declivity twisted slightly and disappeared as it turned around a cluster of broccoli trees, which weren't trees at all. Nothing was alive in hyperspace, except during those short periods when ships were traveling through its indecipherable vastness.

A voice came from behind him. "Quite a view, isn't it?" Jason was en route to his new assignment on Dropout with Mira Harris, recently promoted to manager of the corporation's branch office on that colony planet. Mira had been offered the position previously but had refused the assignment until Dropout had built its own translation station so that she could return expeditiously if she so desired. Following the death of his wife, Jason no longer felt tied to the earth or anything on it and in fact had been actively planning to end his life before deciding to first accept a transfer to Dropout. He was only mildly curious about conditions there, but, more importantly, Kathy had been full of romantic ideas about traveling to other worlds and he felt an intense need to see that she achieved them, even if posthumously. Her ashes were carefully packed in his luggage, a surprisingly small bundle to represent a person who had made up such a large part of his world.

"Too bad we can't take pictures." Mira's voice was flat, and Jason suspected she was saying what she felt was appropriate rather than what she was actually feeling.

One of the other passengers made an amused sound. "Well, you can if you want,

but they won't show anything." Humans perceived hyperspace as an infinite plain dotted with features that were almost always interpreted consistently from individual to individual. Many of these features had been named, like the broccoli trees, which were not living creatures at all, but they looked like trees and they looked like broccoli and everybody saw them as pretty much the same thing. Having no objective physical reality, however, they could not be recorded by photograph or holograph, although artists had been able to render recognizable images.

An older man crowded closer to look out through the observation bubble. "I don't understand how the captain can find his way through this. I understand the landscape is different every time they translate out of normal space."

Jason felt moved to reassure him. "Each of the colony worlds extrudes a beacon into hyperspace. We're homing on the one from Dropout. The landscape may change but the absolute locations don't." Jason's wife had been fascinated by the concept of hyperspace, obsessed with the idea of emigrating to one of the colony worlds, and Jason had picked up a lot of technical knowledge by osmosis. "Even if we just take a short term assignment, Jason. I want to be able to say that once in my life I stood on the surface of another planet." She had regaled him with fresh nuggets of knowledge about hyperspace and the various colony worlds as quickly as she gathered them. He could, had he been so inclined, have lectured on the history and reliability of the colonial beacons at considerable length. But Kathy had never realized her ambition, although she had still been making plans up to a week before her death. Now she would never stand on an alien world, but at least in one sense he would ensure that she fulfilled her dreams.

"But what if the radio breaks down, or we run into some kind of interference? How do we know we're on the right course?" The man sounded nervous and for some reason Jason found that irritating. He recognized the mercurial nature of his own moods, knew that his calm demeanor masked a cauldron of turbulent emotion, but he didn't care.

"Actually we don't. The fact that it has always worked in the past doesn't mean it always will. We could conceivably wander around out here until we ran out of air."

The other man paled and turned away to rejoin his party. Mira gave Jason a slight, mildly puzzled smile. "That was cruel."

"He's a jerk."

"Even so."

Harris would not be his immediate superior on Dropout, but while Jason knew that it would be politically wise to defer to her, he really didn't care and compromised by not responding at all. He did not expect to be around long enough to be affected by her displeasure.

Captain Emilio Ventras sat back from the control board and glanced at his backup, unofficially his Shotgun, Shelly Paris. "How's the signal?"

She shrugged. "Same as always. How are the passengers?"

"The usual motley crew." The exchange was a ritual between them. This was their fiftieth trip together and Paris was probably going to get her own command when they got back. Ventras would miss her.

"Well, at least we have some nice scenery this time." He glanced out across a variegated landscape of gently rising and falling hills, mottled with broccoli trees and a few of the comparatively rare crystal towers, which were neither crystal nor towers.

"If we get too bored, we can play cards."

Boredom would not be one of their problems on this trip.

The engines became audible again and the massive wheels began to turn as the *Rollaway* resumed its journey, descending toward a lowland as flat as anything on

Earth. Captain Ventras had considerable latitude in picking a course because there were no maps to guide him. He could detect his end point, but the territory in between was terra incognita. In fact, it could change while they were traversing it. Just because a hill happened to be facing the valley now didn't mean the same would be true in an hour. The *Conestoga* had nearly been wrecked when a ravine opened up under its wheels a few years earlier, and more recently the *Prairie Schooner* had almost run out of air after it had been overturned by a sudden massive upheaval. In both cases, subsequent investigation had suggested that one or more of the passengers had been experiencing extremely ambivalent attitudes toward emigration or had been undergoing some other form of unusual stress. Successful completion of more probing psychological tests had been added to the criteria for subsequent passenger applications.

Jason was a corporate psychologist and had easily avoided revealing his inner turmoil. He felt no guilt about doing so. He very much wanted to complete the trip to Dropout. It was the last thing he could do for Kathy, and while it wasn't much, it would have to suffice. And then he could lay down his own burden as well.

He glanced around the cabin. There were about thirty passengers, but only one obvious family, a young couple and their daughter. The parents were excited or nervous or both; the daughter—about twelve—was bored. The rest consisted of parties of two to four people, probably on short term assignments, and a handful of solitary individuals of both sexes, most of whom kept to themselves. A few of these might be emigrants as well. There were two cabin stewards, one of each gender, both inconspicuously armed with tranquilizer guns. Despite the best efforts of the screening boards, a few people each year broke down when faced with the para-reality of hyperspace. The most frequent manifestations of HTD—Hyper Transit Disorder—were hallucinations and agoraphobia. Everyone so afflicted had recovered quickly after their return to normal space, but they were routinely drugged if they displayed any extremes of behavior en route. Emotional upheaval by even a single individual could have tangible effects on the communal interpretation of the exterior environment, making navigation more difficult.

Mira returned to her seat and began studying the screen of her PDAX but Jason remained where he was, watching the pseudo-landscape flow past the observation bubble. There had been a time when he would have joined her, more interested in the world of profit and loss, numbers and arrays, connections and financial opportunities than he was in the external world—what Kathy used to call the “real” world. Jason allowed himself a hint of amusement. Whatever existed on the other side of the Perspex bubble wasn’t the real world either, whatever that meant. Scientists and philosophers alike were still trying to decide just what it was.

They had reached the flat land and were moving forward more rapidly now. When he closed his eyes, Jason could not sense movement. The irregularities of the surface, such as they were, were more than compensated for by the pressure and shock absorbers beneath him. One theory held that vehicles in hyperspace didn’t actually move at all. They became immobile relative to the rest of the universe, which then rearranged itself to bring their destination to them. This made no sense to Jason. There might be as many as a dozen vehicles in hyperspace at any given time. The universe couldn’t simultaneously cater to all their needs, could it?

Their route took them in an arc around a low butte, and as they turned Jason could just see a hint of their trail dust. It wasn’t dust, of course, but the interaction of material from the “real” universe with the hyperspatial plain resulted in a temporary darkening of the latter, as though the ship’s wheels were bruising the surface across which they moved. The phenomenon, like most aspects of hyperspace, had gathered lots of theories but few facts.

Jason still wore an old fashioned wristwatch, a family heirloom, but it was of limited utility aboard the *Rollaway*. Transit times between the same two points could vary dramatically; the *Bigwheeler* had been forced to resort to recycled air during a trip to Upstart when the normal eight to twelve hour trip consumed an unprecedented thirty hours. They'd run into no natural barriers requiring detours, but it had still taken longer for reasons that remained a mystery. As with most other ships, the *Rollaway* had been refitted to increase its air supply and the maximum passenger limit had been reduced.

They passed so close to a copse of broccoli trees that a frond almost brushed the bubble's exterior surface. Kathy would have loved this, he thought to himself, and felt a wave of despair and loss so great that he had to put out a hand to steady himself. Only the knowledge that he would not have to live with his grief for much longer kept him from shouting his pain aloud.

Jason felt weary, in spirit if not in body, and leaned to one side against the cool plastic. He didn't quite doze off, but he became less aware of his surroundings, lost in the landscape of his inner mind, and when he finally noticed that the view had changed rather dramatically, he had no idea how much time had passed until he glanced at his wrist again. More than an hour. They should be not quite halfway to their destination given an average transit time.

They were no longer traversing a relatively featureless plain. They had slowed so that the captain could pick his way across an expanse of broken ground. Narrow dunes zigzagged in random directions, none big enough to seriously endanger the ship, although the captain was obviously taking no chances. In the distance, Jason could see shadowy shapes like canyon walls, although the ridgeline was smooth, a succession of gentle curves. There were broccoli trees as well, smaller than usual, but much more numerous than before, a virtual forest.

Mira slipped into the seat beside him. "Didn't you say your wife knew a lot about hyperspace?"

Jason suppressed a twinge of painful memory. "She was obsessed with it. My greatest regret is that she didn't live to see this."

Mira paused automatically as a nod to his grief, but her body language was alert and possibly even tense. "Did she ever mention reading about anything like this? We're practically surrounded."

Jason made a show of looking outside again. "Not specifically. There's quite a range of possible landscapes, you know. Some of it is the result of fluctuations in the underlying energy structure, or at least so the experts think, and some of it depends upon the mental state of the people perceiving it. None of this is objectively real, you understand?"

"Sure. Sure. But we've been going slower and slower for the last half hour and I heard the attendants talking about possibly backtracking to find an alternate route. I was just wondering if that meant something was wrong."

Jason considered his answer. Everything was wrong, of course, in a universe that no longer contained Kathy, but he didn't think that answer would satisfy Mira. "It's unusual but not unprecedented. It may be that there's some kind of flaw or fault blocking our original course and our minds are interpreting the approach as impassable terrain. I wouldn't worry about it."

Mira was obviously not entirely satisfied, but she nodded and went back to her seat. Jason was considering following her, but before he could bestir himself, the *Rollaway* came to a complete stop.

There was a murmuring from the passengers, some of whom looked around curiously, with just a hint of concern. The two stewards maintained their blank masks of amiability and reassurance, but Jason thought he detected a hint of tension in the

way they held their bodies. They were just a shade too attentive, as though they were expecting trouble.

The intercom buzzed and the captain's voice filled the cabin. "There's nothing to be alarmed about, folks, but we're going to have to retrace our steps a bit. The way we've been coming looked pretty clear a while ago, but the surface is getting rougher. Just to be on the safe side, we're going to try to find a little smoother way. In the meantime, we still have plenty of beverages and snacks and the scenery outside is more interesting than usual." Jason decided "interesting" was a euphemism, but he wasn't sure what other term it was standing in for.

After another few minutes, the *Rollaway* began to reverse course. The body of the ship was roughly a cylinder, with the pilot module set on a track above them. The drive train was fully reversible following a short realignment, while the captain's module slowly ran along the track to the opposite end. Then they were in motion again. The attendants assured everyone that backtracking, while unusual, was not unheard of. Most of the passengers had already returned to their work or their conversations and clearly could not have cared less.

They picked up speed for the next few minutes, but Jason was still at the observation bubble and he was one of the first to notice when their pace began to slacken again. Half an hour later they came to another stop.

This time there was noticeable concern among the passengers. Mira and another man Jason hadn't met joined him. She was sweating slightly even though the cabin was as comfortable as when they had departed. "Any idea what's going on, Jason?"

He shrugged. "Probably another course change. The captain knows where the beacon is, of course, but he has to pick his specific route by line of sight." He gestured toward the exterior. "He's probably having some trouble finding a good vantage point." The broccoli trees were denser than ever. It was as if the ship was passing between two dense stands of forest.

"What if he can't find a way?" The other man moved his eyes in jerky, frightened jumps.

Jason shrugged. "Then he either radios back to our base beacon for a relief ship or he waits until the landscape changes again. We have food and supplies for at least four days. There's a lot of safety margin built in."

He expected the ship to start moving again fairly shortly and it did, but it halted once more, after only a few minutes this time. Jason wasn't surprised. He had watched the landscape roughen, ridges rather than hills that almost formed before his eyes. This was obviously something unprecedented and he was fascinated, immune to the apprehension spreading among his fellow travelers. Jason had nothing to fear from death any longer.

Captain Ventras addressed the passengers again, explaining that they had run into a denser patch of obstruction than he had expected. "There's nothing to worry about. We're perfectly safe where we are and we can just wait for things to shift again. As a precaution I've asked that a relief ship be placed on standby, so even if we're stuck here for a while, we can be resupplied or, if absolutely necessary, there are enough environmental suits for us to evacuate to the relief vehicle."

His voice was calm, clear, and professional, but people were frightened anyway. The attendants suggested card games or other distractions but with little success. Passengers began to watch each other, or tried to nap, or simply stared at the floor. Very few looked toward either of the observation bubbles, and Jason had his all to himself.

There were no formal sleeping arrangements aboard the *Rollaway*, but the seats all reclined. Several people asked about sleeping aids, but the attendants couldn't help them. "We're not allowed to bring any psychoactive agents aboard a ship except as cargo," they explained. Jason knew that already; minds affected by drugs—even

alcohol—had unpredictable effects on the hyperspatial terrain. He also knew that they weren't telling the entire truth; the weapons on their belts fired darts filled with a powerful tranquilizer that suppressed most mental activity, though they would only be used in an emergency.

Jason ate and napped for a while, then returned to his seat in the bubble. No one had usurped his place in his absence.

Time passed. Twice the ship began to move and twice it stopped almost immediately. The captain told them he was just topping up the charge on the batteries, but no one believed him. They were sure that he was trying to find a way out, and failing each time.

A full day passed before one of the passengers—an older man—created a disturbance. He began shouting at the attendants, demanding to see the captain, and their attempts to calm him only provoked a more animated outburst. They were forced to subdue him physically and restrain him in his seat until his terror-fed anger burned out and he wept quietly. Jason was surprised that they hadn't tranquilized the troublemaker, but they seemed off their own game, less attentive than usual, occasionally talking in whispers when they thought no one was watching. The distraught man subsided, but several other passengers had become visibly disturbed.

The weeping man became uncommunicative later that day. One of the stewards went aloft to speak to Captain Ventras directly for a while, after which the captain announced that he had requested that the relief ship make as close an approach as possible so the troublesome passenger could be evacuated. Anyone else who preferred to return to Earth station could do so if they were willing to suit up and make the short trek that would obviously be necessary. A half dozen people indicated their wish to take advantage of the opportunity, but as it happened, no one ever left.

The relief ship couldn't find them.

Radio works in hyperspace, which is why the beacons function. Ship to ship is a little trickier, apparently because ships aren't anchored in the "real" universe the way station beacons were. In the past, rescue ships had always been able to home in on a distress signal, but this time they failed. Ventras insisted these were minor technical difficulties, but the female steward was having trouble maintaining her composure and Jason overheard snatches of conversation between the woman and her co-worker from which he was able to guess a part of the truth.

The relief ship could not find the *Rollaway*, could not even find the patch of overgrown terrain where they were stranded.

"How are the passengers holding up?" Ventras had wakened from a deep sleep, checked his instrumentation, and ascertained that nothing significant had changed externally.

Paris shook her head. "No further disturbances, but it's only a matter of time if we don't give them some good news pretty soon." She wiped the hair back from her forehead. "For that matter, I'm going to be a little upset if something doesn't happen. What do you think the problem is?"

She'd asked that question twice before, and he still didn't have a good answer.

More time passed.

Jason had more or less taken up a permanent position in the bubble. He stood up and walked around occasionally, ate with the others, sometimes napped in his assigned seat, but he no longer felt as though he was a part of the company. At times he had trouble assigning sense to what they were saying, although in his defense, sometimes there wasn't a great deal of sense there to start with.

Halfway into the third day, he saw something moving outside, which was impossible.

At first he thought he had slipped into a daydream, or that he'd misinterpreted the fall of a shadow. But there were no shadows in hyperspace because there was no light source, and he'd been completely alert. One of the other passengers had noticed his start and wandered over curiously. "See something?"

"No. I just drifted off for a moment." He was impatient for the man to be gone and when he finally turned away, Jason pressed his face close to the Perspex and stared outside. Nothing moved. He watched for a long time before reluctantly deciding that just maybe he'd fallen asleep after all.

And then he saw it again. Or almost saw it. There was just a flicker between two broccoli tree trunks, or stalks, or whatever they were. As though something had moved from concealment behind one to the next. It was cautious rather than furtive, although he could never have explained how he recognized such a subtle difference.

He stared intently at the same spot while trying not to give away his interest to anyone else in the cabin. If there really was something out there, its discovery was his and his alone. If he couldn't share it with Kathy, then he wasn't going to share it with anyone.

But nothing happened for long minutes and once again his certainty began to waver. The scene outside had in fact changed over the course of the past several hours. The distant ridgeline was a lot less distant now, and if it had been actual rock and sand instead of an artifact of human perception, he would have been able to pick out striations or irregularities, had there been any. The broccoli forest had thinned out a bit, although he'd never actually seen any of the individual specimens disappear. He just happened to notice that there were fewer, although still far too many to allow the *Roll-away* to pass through. Some of the passengers had insisted that the captain try to force his way, but he had declined. Experience had already demonstrated that humans were incapable of altering their environment in hyperspace, at least by physical means. Lasers, acid, cutting tools, brute force, even a nuclear detonation had all been tried.

Jason fancied that the air was getting a little stale, but it was probably his imagination. They were good for forty hours even before they went to recycling. He wasn't really sure how long they would last after that.

He did fall asleep then, slumped in the less than comfortable seats provided for sightseers. He dreamed of Kathy, not surprisingly since he did so almost all the time now. They were back at the house and he was working in his den. She was outside, wearing a bathing suit and playing in the spray from the sprinklers as though she was a child. He was watching her when she turned, smiled, and came over to the window, rapped on it and gestured for him to come out and join her.

His head snapped up and he stared into Kathy's eyes. They were there just for a second, then they were gone. And they'd been on the other side of the Perspex dome. He was absolutely certain of it.

"Is anything wrong?" Mira was standing to his left. Her voice had picked up a slight tremor and her head moved in sudden, birdlike twitches.

"Just a dream." He stood up and stretched. "Did I miss anything while I was out?"

"There are two rescue ships out now, but they still can't find us." She gave a nervous laugh. "I was told this assignment might be an adventure, but this is a bit more than I was expecting."

For just a moment, perhaps because Mira's mouth twisted into a half smile that reminded him of Kathy, he felt a twinge of empathy. "We'll be all right. There's someone watching out for us."

Mira gave him an appraising look. "I didn't realize you were the religious type, Jason." She would have read his personnel files, of course.

"I'm not, really." He looked away, already regretting his minor indiscretion.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." He kept his eyes fixed on the exterior, and it was several minutes before he realized he was alone again. The rest of the passengers had drawn physically closer to one another, seeking mutual comfort. Jason felt no temptation to join them. He had been alone constantly for the past year. He was used to it.

He saw Kathy several times during the course of the next hour. There would be a flash of movement and he'd spot the shape of a head drawing back into the fronds, or spot an arm or leg just as she moved from one point to the next. There was no continuity. She might be to his right one second, to his left the next. She was never in view long enough for him to focus, and certainly not long enough for him to call someone else over to confirm what he was seeing. Technically, he supposed, it might not be Kathy at all as far as objective evidence was concerned. But he knew it was her, particularly when he caught a glimpse of her eyes.

Most of the others were sleeping when she finally revealed herself fully. Jason had been on the verge of nodding off when movement attracted his attention. A shape emerged from behind one of the closer broccoli trees. He thought it would be just another fleeting glimpse, but then she stepped out into the open, hands on her hips, and looked directly at him. She wasn't wearing an environmental suit and he knew that was impossible, but he didn't care. This was his Kathy. She hadn't abandoned him after all.

She raised one hand and beckoned to him and he knew what he had to do.

The two stewards were taking turns sleeping. The woman—Jason had not bothered to learn their names—was currently snoring softly. Her partner was sitting in the second observation dome, supposedly watching over the passengers, although his eyelids were drooping. Jason stood up slowly and stretched, surreptitiously watching to see if the steward would react. He did not. Jason began walking around the cabin, careful not to disturb anyone, and took a drink from the dispenser. He was almost within reach of the second attendant now, who had turned partially onto one side. Her holstered tranquilizer gun was facing in his direction.

He felt no trepidation when he lunged for it. His mind was filled with absolute certainty that this was right, inevitable even. The weapon slid out of its holster and he fired down into the woman's thigh as soon as his finger slipped inside the trigger guard. He turned and saw that the male steward had gotten to his feet but had yet to reach for his own weapon. Jason shot him. The woman was already out and the man followed with a strangled shout of surprise. He fell to the floor.

Jason retreated to one corner as the passengers began to rouse. He didn't wait for them to get organized. "Everyone stay calm. I'm not going to hurt anyone, but there is something I have to do."

Mira separated herself from the others, walking directly toward him. "Put that thing down, Jason. Don't make a fool of yourself." Her voice was steady, expecting obedience. He shot her without a second thought and she crumpled to the floor, a look of complete amazement on her face. The twelve-year-old began to scream.

"Keep your distance," he warned.

One of the other men thrust himself forward. "He can't get us all, and that thing just knocks you out for a while. Let's take him down."

Jason shot the speaker, then the two men who had been flanking him, then another for good measure. "I'll shoot you all if I have to." He wasn't sure that he could, though. He had no idea how many anesthetic darts were available. Still covering the others, he edged around to the supine male attendant and quickly confiscated his weapon. It had never left its holster.

"You!" He gestured toward the burly man who'd introduced himself as Bert Ralston. "Open the emergency locker."

Ralston hesitated. "Do it or it's sleepy time."

The man did as he'd been told.

"Now take out one of the environmental suits and bring it to me." That took a while. The suit consisted of several components that were assembled around the user rather than worn. The helmet came last and Ralston tried to use it as a club. Jason shot him.

"You're being very foolish, Mr. Tallant." The voice came from the intercom. Captain Ventras and his team had obviously been monitoring the passenger deck. "Please put down your weapons and return to your seat. We understand that you're frightened, but this isn't going to help."

Jason was elated, not frightened. He ignored their instructions and very carefully began to climb into the lower module of the environmental suit. It was difficult because he also had to keep one weapon pointed at the others, but he managed. Captain Ventras addressed him several more times, cajoling, soothing, promising, threatening. Jason continued to ignore him.

The suit was almost completely assembled when a half dozen passengers came at him at once. He dropped three of them with darts and a fourth stumbled over one of his fellows and landed heavily. The other two reached him but the environmental suit augmented his strength adequately. He brushed them aside, tossed down the tranquilizer guns, and sealed his suit.

No one tried to stop him after that. They didn't even bother to retrieve the discarded weapons, which could not have penetrated his suit in any case. He strode to the emergency airlock, moving rather awkwardly, and activated the inner seal. No one pleaded with him not to go. They were probably glad to be rid of him.

She was waiting for him outside. Jason was surprised at first to see that she didn't need an environmental suit. He turned on his radio but the only sound was Captain Ventras demanding that he return to the ship. After a few seconds, Jason clicked it off. He and Kathy had never needed words to communicate. He took her hand and let her lead him away.

The broccoli trees had retreated ahead of him, forming a pathway that led off into the distance. They walked directly up the center and Jason felt light-headed and joyful for the first time in more than a year. "It should be yellow bricks," he told her, knowing she couldn't hear him. But she turned her head and nodded and he almost fancied that the surface under his feet had shifted color slightly, the palest of yellows that turned darker where his feet had touched. Not trail dust, he told himself. Fairy dust.

"We have clearance, Captain." Paris turned and waited for instructions.

Ventras had been trying to direct some of the passengers to restore order within the ship. It was physically possible for one of the command officers to descend into the passenger module, but it was a time-consuming process and in any case he wanted Paris with him on the bridge. Now he turned and did a quick visual survey to confirm what he'd heard. "Engage engines." If there was an opportunity to escape, he would take it, even if that meant abandoning the wayward passenger.

Within seconds, the *Rollaway* was in motion. A short distance forward, he saw the figure of a man in an environmental suit turn from the open path into a smaller one, too small for the *Rollaway* to follow, and he knew that this was the last he would ever see of Jason Tallant. And he saw something else as well.

Jason's path was only faintly visible from the top of the *Rollaway*, but the discoloration of the surface created by his passing formed a distinct, continuous line that disappeared beneath the ship and extended, presumably, back to where he had disembarked. That was not at all surprising. But Ventras had a great deal to think about during the balance of the trip to Dropout, because parallel to that track had been another, slightly smaller but no less distinct. O

THE TERMITE QUEEN OF TALLULAH COUNTY

Felicity Shoulders

Felicity Shoulders' first collaboration, a story written with Leslie What, was recently published in the anthology *Is Anybody Out There?* The author tells us that the following story "owes a great deal to my grandmother and her recent termite home invasion."

Granddad tugged a banana off the bunch and waved it at me. "You still planning to change the company name?"

"You bet. I never liked 'Tidwell and Daughter.'"

Granddad's eyebrows did one of their caterpillar tarantellas. "So you say, but I see no action. It's been five months, Lacey-girl. Change the name. Hire somebody to go with you on calls. Your pop's not coming back." This was a little harsh even for him, so he added, "To work."

I could tell he was watching me, so I worked on buttering my toast all the way to the edge. He was waiting to see if I'd glance over at Pop in his armchair, but what was there to see? Pop had spent the first few months staring at nothing, so I'd moved a couple shelves of family pictures into his eye-line. He stared at those now.

Granddad abandoned his vigil and started slicing the banana over his bowl of cereal. "You should go back to the name I used! 'Tidwell the Termite King'!"

I made a face and stuffed it with toast.

"Termites built this house," he said, which I'd heard so many times it didn't even give me cognitive dissonance anymore.

"Yeah, yeah." The house was new when my pop was a six-year-old only child, but Granddad would never move to anything bigger or, now that he was old, single-story. We had to stay in the house that termites built.

He rubbed the banana peel over his gnarled knuckles, leaving them glistening and glutinous. This supposedly relieved his arthritis, and I figured at eighty-eight, you've earned the right to play with your food if you want to. He dropped the peel on the floor and called, "Mazzu! Mazzu, get in here."

"Christ, Granddad, it's five feet to the trashcan. I can do it if you don't want to."

"Don't deprive an old man of his only joy." The care-bot whirred in, a squat thing in robin egg blue. "Pick up peel! Put peel in trash!" he barked.

"It understands natural sentences. And yesterday peanut brittle was your only joy."

Granddad raised one of his banana-scented hands and gave the royal wave. "Don't you have work to do?"

I checked my watch. "Shit, yes. And no time for coffee."

"That's my little Termite Queen," he cooed as I made for the van in the driveway. He resumed yelling at the care-bot, probably getting it to mush some banana for Pop.

I was only a few blocks from my appointment when Elly piped up. The electronic secretary had been Pop's only technological upgrade to the business since getting our Temporal Accreditation twenty years ago, so I should have been pleased. But "Elly," however nominally devoid of human flaws, was kind of a nosy nag.

"The client specified the vehicle be unmarked," she said from the van's console. "Have you covered the vehicle markings?"

"You couldn't ask before I started driving?"

Elly didn't respond to rhetorical questions. Or insults. I hadn't tested threats yet. I pulled over by the high school's soccer field and wiggled the magnetic rectangle out from under my seat. Unfurled, it just covered the van's legend. It was a pretty tasteful logo, all told, although between "Tidwell & Daughter" and the Temporal Intervention Bureau seal it did read "Termite Trouble? You *Can Turn Back Time!*" There was an outfit down in California that sported a man with an outsized hammer chasing a cartoon roach, so our van looks pretty classy in context. But the client is, if not always right, usually happier when jolted along, so I slapped the thing on.

"If you'd updated the van with screen signs as I suggested, you could have done that with the push of a button," Elly said as I climbed back in.

"And if I'd done that, today you'd be asking me to run animated ads on the side of my van and cause traffic accidents. Forget it."

This neighborhood was all post-World War Two bungalows, home to decades of black widows and grand termite families of many generations' standing. My pop and I had visited so many houses on this block the neighbors would know my van in a blink, magnet or no.

As if to prove my point, the next-door matron stopped deadheading late roses to wave as I pulled up. I jumped down and she called, "Lacey Tidwell! How's your dad doing?"

"About as well as can be expected," I said, which I'd settled on as an acceptable yet honest formula. The woman shook her head and decapitated a rose with such moral force it flew onto this side of the fence.

A thin young man, twenty or a bit older, had been watching our exchange from inside the house, and now he flapped the screen door open by way of hurrying things along.

I shut the van on Elly's voice: "Client name: Vivian Sower. 194 North—"

"Mr. Sower?" I said to the kid at the door, who was genuinely *wringing* his hands. He ushered me into the house and a welcome smell of dark-roast coffee.

"Anthony Sower. It's my grandma's house. I'm just visiting from the Bay Area, and then *this* happened."

I raised an eyebrow, as Elly hadn't made the call from Grandma V. sound nearly so urgent. Anthony raised a pointer finger, and I looked where directed. "*This*" turned out to be a fairly standard plume of winged termites fluttering out from behind a flowered sofa.

Anthony looked at me pleadingly, so I said, "Ah yes."

"Termite queens!"

"Well, not exactly. Alates. Both genders. But termites, certainly."

"How bad is it?"

"It's impossible to tell from up here. I'll have to go under the house and check it out."

I hunkered and peered at the lace of cobweb and termite wings between the wall and sofa, then looked up as the coffee entered the room, ushered by an old lady in canary separates.

"I thought I'd bring the man some coffee," she said, negotiating a step down, then looking up from the tray. "Oh."

"It's okay, Grandma," Anthony said. "She knows her stuff."

Apparently knowing a word that he didn't was all the qualifications young Anthony required, but Vivian was still dubious.

"I'm Lacey Tidwell, president of Tidwell Exterminators."

"Vivian Sower." Anthony relieved her of the tray and failed to find anywhere thinly enough knick-knacked to put it.

"Is this room an addition by any chance?"

"Why yes! My parents built it before I was born."

"These termites are swarming up the seam between the concrete slab they built on and the foundation proper. That's why you're seeing them right here."

The old woman smiled and offered me coffee from the tray Anthony was barely holding. "Cream and sugar, dear?"

"Neither," I said. I take both in private life, but I'm not above doing a tough-gal routine if it'll help with a client.

The entrance to the crawlspace was a square shaft in the carport concrete, right up against the yellow shake siding of the house. I squatted to pull off the wooden hatch and the board came away in my hand, trailing a thick beard of sawdust-choked cobweb. I tore the wood loose and dropped it, gnawed side up.

"Is that bad?" asked Anthony from the sliding door.

"It's not good, and it's not safe either."

He stepped out and eyed the dark hole. "That's awful! What if Grandma had fallen in?"

He wasn't such a bad kid, really. "I'll pick up some 2x4s and knock a new cover together when I'm done here." I picked out the rest of the decrepit boards and wiped the swags of webbing away from the entrance with a gloved hand.

I went back to the van for my underground kit: coveralls that cinch over my gloves and boots, a stocking cap and a little neck protector like an inside-out dickey. That keeps the inside of my clothes a vertebrate-only region.

"Why won't you let me interface with you when you examine crawlspaces? There's a headset in the glove box," Elly said.

"You wouldn't like it down there." I grabbed my LED floodlight from its charging slot and rummaged for my headlamp.

"The device you use to make audio memos is crude. Hearing your notes would facilitate my organization of the photos."

"I've said no every time. I'm tired of repeating it."

"I would make your business more efficient."

"This business was so efficient without your input that it had money to waste on you. Puzzle on that." I closed the door. There had to be some user preferences somewhere, some big dial marked "Meddling" I could turn down.

I lowered a ladder into the narrow hole in the concrete and tried to shake my annoyance. As a child I had longed to follow my father down into these mysterious depths, and I could still capture some of that excitement.

"It's like a Lara Croft game," I had said, and Granddad, leaning against the van in his supervisory capacity, had laughed.

"Looks like it'll be Tidwell and Daughter!" he had called after Pop. Since my brother

Benny grew up to be arachnophobic and six feet tall, it ended up a good bet. I saw three black widows just dropping into the Sowers' crawlspace, and the headlamp's beam hit at least half a dozen more glossy females as I looked down the passage. Probably the Sowers were never more than a yard away from one. If they only knew. "Don't get up, ladies," I muttered, and thumbed the big button on my "clumsy" recorder. "Recommend spider spray."

Even without the impetus of planning a spidercide in front of the intended victims, I found I spoke softly in these underground spaces. No matter how dirty and infested, they were peaceful, the air cool but too still to bite the skin, the walls somehow aware that I—my father and I—were the first humans to see them in years.

That's in most cases: if someone had been down there, they might have seen the first termite tubes or trapped the first breeding pairs of mice. Unlike ancient tombs and hidden treasures, the undersides of houses take kindly to being disturbed.

Mrs. Sower's house looked as though it hadn't been. There were wispy traces of cardboard underfoot, and the delicate skin of plastic or wax that had backed some food wrapper. The paper was no more, food for bygone generations of termites. I stepped over the tunnel-ridden corpse of a plank, and winced when my foot plashed into a layer of water. "Remove debris."

The mud scent would already be rising from my boot treads, through the vents and into the house. Vivian and Anthony would be disoriented, eyes telling them they were in their home while their noses insisted they were outdoors. The water was bad news for them, good for termites and therefore my paycheck. Granddad says the only thing softer than my heart is my head, but I always hope for the best when I go into a house. An easy job for me, good news for the house and homeowner. That wouldn't be the case this time.

I clicked the floodlight on. The concrete foundations were striped with mud shelter tubes like long dribbles, taking the colony from the happy hour appetizers on the floor to the meal of the house above. Like the house had grown a new, parasitic circulatory system, parallel to and distinct from its plumbing and ventilation.

Plumbing. I groaned. "Locate leak, remove standing water." I'd have to figure out where the water was coming from—examine every inch of the pipes if I was lucky, or analyze the drainage if I wasn't. I don't mind the methodical or muddy parts of my job, but I hate meticulous. Probably Elly could assemble a 3D model and pinpoint a drainage issue in minutes, but I wasn't ready to bring the mechanical marvel down here. I didn't want to share this childhood dream of dark creepy spaces, the adolescent memory of my pop knocking off work to eat a box of Fiddle Faddle in someone's filthy attic or basement with his clean, de-gloved hands. Elly might remind me, God help us, of my mother, but she wasn't family.

Mud was cementing the debris of paper and lumber to my boots, but it wasn't worth kicking it off yet. I fumbled my camera out of my coverall pocket and leaned over to get a photo of a bloom of mold. I steadied myself with a hand up to a floor joist, and felt my fingers sink in. The cellulose had been eaten away and only the long grains of lignin remained, loose in my glove like straws. I hopped back, splashing muddy water up, then took a picture of the bite my fingers had taken. How much of this house's framing was made up of ghost wood, only keeping its shape out of habit? "Bait termites, remove shelter tubes . . ."

I climbed back up my ladder and found Elly already halfway through the report, borrowing captions and language from reports my pop and I had written since her tenure. She did have her points. I sighed. "You can't write the whole thing. I doubt there's been a case with such extensive damage since we got you."

Anthony Sower rapped on the van window and I opened up. "Well? How is it?"

"It's not good news. I'm putting together a report now." I pointed to the console screen where Elly was flashing photos and paragraphs.

"I thought it might be bad," he whispered. "Grandma says she usually just sprays them and vacuums up the bodies. How many years has she been doing that?"

The report ended up 10 pages long. Mrs. Sower swiped past photos of the leaking pipe, the termite infestation, the mold. Every problem except the spiders was illustrated—I find clients don't need or want photos of the spiders in order to justify paying for the spray.

I stopped her as she was about to bring up the estimate page on her screen, trying not to imagine her having a heart attack when she saw the amount. "Can I ask you a few questions?"

"Of course."

"How long have you lived in the house?"

"All my life! My father and mother bought it brand new after the war, before I was born. My mother's health was never strong, so I stayed with her after I grew up. When I married Alfie, he moved in too."

"Did anyone ever go into the crawlspace that you recall?"

"Heavens, no! There was a bench across that trapdoor when I was little, and Alfie wasn't a man for dirty jobs."

"Was anyone ever hired to go down there? To update plumbing, or—"

Anthony laughed. "She doesn't even have a garbage disposal."

Vivian knitted her fingers. "Did we do something wrong?"

"Well, yes. There was a lot of material left underground when the house was built—" Granddad used to do home construction, so I like to use the passive voice, not get too harsh on the builders—"left right on the ground where the termites could smell it and come up. If someone had been down there to clean up, or even to notice their tunnels . . ."

"I really don't want to see this estimate, do I, Ms. Tidwell?"

"You can look at it, but I want you to know there may be a less expensive option."

She paged to the estimate, ran down the columns to the total, and closed her eyes.

"What does 'plus reconstruction' mean?" Anthony said, looking about as moist and pale as the mold beneath his feet.

"It means Tidwell's isn't a construction company, so I can't give you an estimate for replacing the wood in the structure once the termites are gone. But I can give you some recommendations, and it really needs to be done. Unless you go with my other option."

"What is it?" Vivian asked, eyes still shut against the multitude of zeros on the screen.

I selected the Temporal Intervention Bureau brochure on my tablet and sent it across.

"Because your crawlspace has been largely undisturbed, we may be able to get a TIB permit for a temporal intervention."

Vivian looked blank, but Anthony regained some life. "Time travel?"

"They really prefer we call it temporal intervention. Time travel sounds as if we were doing it for fun. TI technology is only cleared for industrial and ecological use, not for tourism." I felt pretty pompous, but I had only finished the training three months ago, so the party line was clear in my mind. I hadn't done a temporal intervention yet myself, but I wasn't about to tell the Sowers that.

"Is it expensive?" Vivian asked, pinching her sweater closed at the neck.

"Yes," I said, "but a lot less expensive than repairing all this damage. There's a fixed intervention fee, and my labor removing all the detritus from under your house. I'd also prevent the sink leak from occurring and treat all the exposed wood with micronized copper. If someone does look down there in the intervening years, there won't be any traps or anachronistic plastic to see, but it'll be protected. I'll come back here and reassess. And do that spider spray."

Vivian clapped her palms on the table. "My house will never have been eaten!"

Anthony frowned. "If the termites never became a problem, won't we not have called you? Or paid you? How will you know anything happened?"

My mom used to say that no one would ever think I had a speck of intelligence if I killed bugs for a living, but somehow when temporal intervention comes up, people ask me thesis questions in advanced physics. "It doesn't work that way. I'll be here to check up and get paid. We'll all remember this, I promise. And if we don't, it's my pocket not yours, right?"

Vivian gave a faltering smile. "Isn't there any way to kill all the termites? Make sure they aren't there to smell out the wood to begin with?"

"My granddad likes to say it would take a bunker buster to get rid of all the termites in town. I'll go ahead and submit the request. I'll have to play up the historical value of your house—got anything to add on that score?"

Vivian sat up straight. "My father planted the only redwoods within Granite Valley city limits! They're downtown, though, next to the golf course."

I shrugged. "I'll do what I can."

The Temporal Intervention Device was probably more expensive than the rest of Tidwell Exterminators put together. The training isn't cheap either, which is why only one of us at a time was trained. Pop had already been planning to retire, so I was partway through the course when he had the attack. I never understood why he put so much money into TIB certification in the first place. A small town only has work for one or two exterminators, so I doubted any competitor would get TI and undercut us on the worst infestation jobs. We were undercutting ourselves, and that at great expense. Didn't seem like Pop. Maybe he had an adventurous, boyish streak I never observed—maybe he just wanted to travel through time.

I took the control unit out of the wall safe at the office and used a little hydraulic lift to load the device and probe into my van.

If Elly hadn't so often informed me that she had no personality for me to object to, I would have sworn she was excited. "How long do you plan to remain in the past?" she asked.

"Five hours ought to be enough. I can go back twice if I need a little more time."

"How was the insertion point selected?"

"Vivian says she was born October 3, 1954, and it was a long labor. No one will be home for hours."

"No siblings?"

"Staying with an aunt on the other side of the river. I know what I'm doing, Elly."

"If I am to help, I must learn every aspect of the business."

"Must you?" I got out, arranged the warning pylons, and lifted down the probe. It's small, a wheeled contraption just big enough to be a pain to carry down a ladder into a crawlspace. I left it a few feet in and returned to the van. I studied the device. Just like in class. Time controls, mode, and a counter: thirty-one trips made.

I entered October 3, 1954, 7:30 PM and pressed "Probe Mode." The programmed time backed up six minutes to allow the little rover to do its stuff. I entered my combination. There was an alarm bell from the crawlspace, then a snapping sound. I had manned the van for several of Pop's interventions, but I couldn't help a thrill this time. I sent a bot back across the decades. I would be going there, too.

The screen showed everything was fine: the probe's light picked out walls, a spider, even an intact crawlspace cover. No signs of human activity. No trouble. The probe lowered its angled broom arm and swept a circle around itself, so I wouldn't materialize with a nail through my boot. I pressed "Sequence Complete" and waited for the noise of the thing returning, a more subtle sound like a toy being put on a shelf.

"All clear," I told the device, and it directed me to the touch screen. Most of the buttons were conventional, for use with gloves, but in order to send myself I had to touch about a thousand checkboxes. I buckled on the TID belt and asked for five hours. Wrench, work gloves, copper spray, portable soldering kit, mask, collapsible bin. I had forgotten to get the probe out, so I had to drop everything, lug that, and start again. I carried my gear down to the bottom of the ladder. The probe had swept a matching circle in our time, so I hunched in the center.

I realized I was actually scared, my excitement winnowed away by the checklist. The machine was supposed to be safe, as long as you didn't use it too often. The government-mandated max of forty trips per person was very conservative, they said. No effects at all under eighty uses. But of course, it was exterminators, toxic waste cleaners, and the like using it, not the bureaucrats and politicians who set the rules. I shoved the thought aside and pressed the big red button on my belt.

Temporal intervention isn't as glamorous as you might think. There's no bright light, just a momentary dimming, like a blink. It doesn't seem like anything's that different for a second, while you breathe the air you brought with you. Then the old air hits your nose and it is different. 1954 had no mold and a faint pleasant scent. I heard a drumming outside, and I realized the smell was rain, yards away. Rain that fell before my father was born.

I shivered and started down the passage. The builders had been incredibly sloppy. Dropped cigarette packs, odd remnants, and wood corners, yes, but also 2x4s they could have salvaged just piled around like termite lures. Where I'd seen the wisp of a long-ago food wrapper, sure enough, there was an empty Fiddle Faddle box. I swallowed a chuckle and pulled out my soldering iron. Five hours of labor. I'd better get to it.

I was barely done cleaning up the detritus when the device pulled me back. I'd been told it could grab you even if you didn't return to the insertion spot, but I was posed diligently on that swept place as if it was a transporter pad. Blink, back to my own time.

I pushed the overfull bin of lumber and scraps over the lip of the opening and went back over the crawlspace, marveling at the change. No termite tubes. Fewer spiders, since there was less food about. No standing water, no mold. On the once-decayed joist, I found only my muddy glove-print.

I took some photos and returned to the surface. I luggered the trash to the van and let it fall heavily into the back.

"What will you do with the debris?" Elly asked.

"Take it to a TIB-approved dump site and send it through by dead of 1954 night." Some of the crap had gone flying when I dropped the bin, so I had to collect it again. On general principle, 1954 stuff had to go back to 1954.

"What is time travel like?" Elly asked, I think. I was distracted by the trash I'd just picked up. "Ms. Tidwell?"

Our lives are pretty full of trash. Scrolling livefeeds, brand names, logos: visual noise. Somehow on first glance this image hadn't sunk in. Elly's inquiries had gotten fairly personal by this point, and I managed to answer.

"No, don't call the paramedics. Look something up for me. When did they start making Fiddle Faddle?"

Pop was just where I'd left him, though now there was a spot of sun shining through his sparse hair to his scalp. Granddad was sitting next to him now, though, doing a paper crossword in erasable pen. I threw the grimy Fiddle Faddle box down on the coffee table.

"What the hell's that? Mazzu, pick up—"

"Mazzu, go recharge," I said. I was still wearing my coveralls, my hat, that ridiculous dickey. "That's a Fiddle Faddle box, Granddad."

"Do you think I'm an idiot? This is a Friday puzzle I'm doing, you know!"

"I pulled this box out of the basement of 194 North Oak Street. In 1954."

Granddad blinked. "Don't look at me, I was a little boy at the time."

"They didn't make Fiddle Faddle in 1954. It came out in 1967."

"Maybe it's an off-brand! Fiddle-Fiddle." He picked up the flattened box.

"Now I get to ask if you think *I'm* stupid."

"Well, it's strange. So what? Why should I be able to explain it?"

"I can explain it myself. Pop left it there. Pop used the TID, went back in time, and seeded that house with wood scraps to attract termites. And he brought a snack." I thumped my fist on the table. I wanted Pop to jump. I wanted him to look guilty, to explain himself. He just stared.

"That's ridiculous. Why would your father do that? He had plenty of business."

"Aren't you the one that says there's no such thing as too much business, Granddad?"

"Take off your boots, you're grinding mud into the carpet."

"Don't change the subject! We're talking about Pop defrauding the entire town of Granite Valley. We're talking about an exterminator that breeds termites, for fuck's sake!" I looked down at Pop, trying to reconcile this scheme with the gentle, hard-working man he'd been. "Why'd you do it?" I yelled.

"He was just trying to support his family," Granddad muttered.

"Weren't you even listening in the classes, Pop? It's a Federal crime to use the thing without a permit!"

"Too many laws these days."

"Anything could have happened! You could have run into somebody setting mouse-traps, or fouled up history or something."

"Never did no harm."

I looked at Granddad then, all pinched in on himself, frowning at a spot of mud on the floor. He wouldn't meet my eyes.

"Oh god," I said, suddenly dizzy. I stumbled back into a chair. "He did. He hurt himself. How many times did he use the TID, Granddad?"

"Enough to show your mother and her snooty parents they underestimated the Tidwells!"

"This was about Mom? About Grandma and Granddad Trelane?"

"No, I didn't mean that. I just meant it served them right."

"Sure, *you* didn't mean that. The guy that got us drivable cars he couldn't afford for Christmas just to show up the other grandparents."

"Your father just wanted enough money to keep you and Benny comfortable, that's all."

"We didn't need the money, Granddad! Do you know how much I found in the bank, never touched? Christ. We needed Pop, not the money. You have to tell me what you know. How many times did he go?"

Nothing.

"How many times, Granddad? A hundred? Seventy-five? Every house in Granite Valley that has outdoor crawlspace access? How many times did he go?"

"He went enough," the old man muttered.

I stared at my boots, covered with dirt from two time periods, indistinguishable. The carpet was old, my muddy footprints falling on top of half-removed stains and the texture of Mazzu's tread tracks. "All this time, I've been telling myself that what happened to Pop was a fluke, you know? One of those things that happen to someone else, until it happens to you. Now I come to find out he did it to himself, and you sit there justifying it. Saying it's for me. Well, who asked for it?"

I stood up and walked back out the front door. For once Granddad didn't have anything to say.

I drove out of the driveway too fast, forced myself to slow down. I turned into the riverside park and stopped the van under the trees. Some children were chasing each other down by the bank, others ripping up bread for the ducks. I bent my head over the steering wheel and closed my eyes. I listened to the river, the kids shrieking.

After a few minutes, Elly said, "Is there anything I can do to help?" I swear she spoke more quietly than usual.

I sniffed, and turned my head. "What records do you have? Business records, I mean?"

"I have access to all the computerized files. Everything since 1998."

"But you didn't know anything about this?"

"He didn't keep any records."

"Of course, he wouldn't."

"What do you want to know?"

"I want to know when he started this. The very first time."

"He received the Temporal Intervention Device on August first, twenty—"

"First of August?"

"Is there some significance to the date?"

"It would have been my parents' silver wedding anniversary. If she hadn't divorced him the year before." I twisted the vinyl on the steering wheel and went over everything Granddad had said. "Did we ever do a termite call at 240 McCullough?"

"Five years ago. Minor damage, standard termination."

"That was it. That was the first house he baited."

"How do you know?"

"It's my grandparents' house. His in-laws."

"It says here the homeowners are a Zach and Edward Farmer."

"Yeah, my grandparents moved to Florida right after my mom did."

"But they lived there when he received the TID?"

"Yes."

"Why would he choose that house?"

I stared out at the dark needles of the firs and cedars, trying to phrase it so a computer could understand. "Because he was never enough," I said finally, "not for them."

"What are you going to do?"

I blinked, surprised she hadn't guessed. "I'm going to stop him. Are you going to help me?"

"Of course."

"You realize it's against the law, even if I'm doing it for all the right reasons?"

"All I want to do is help."

I felt some of the tension in my gut relax, and I leaned back in my chair to laugh. "Somehow, I had managed not to realize that, Elly."

Zach Farmer was willing enough to have a free crawlspace inspection. "I have to admit, I haven't been down there since you and your dad cleaned it up. I keep meaning to—you said I should check every couple of years—"

"Not to worry, Mr. Farmer. I'll make sure nothing's gone wrong under there." The tense might be inaccurate, but that was sort of what I was doing.

"I was just about to go to the store, but if I need to stay . . ."

"Not at all, unless you've put a padlock on the crawlspace." He laughed gamely. "I'll just put a note on your door when I'm done."

I checked the windows to make sure no one else was home and watching before I

carried the probe down. I carried it through the crawlspace—didn't want to drop it, and myself, right on top of Pop—and gave the place a once-over. No termite infestation, just a lot of cobwebs. We'd done good work, Pop and I. Of course, it was unnecessary work, and we'd basically swindled the Farmers out of their fee. If everything turned out right down here, would they suddenly get the fee back plus interest, while remembering having paid us? What if they had gotten termites naturally in the intervening period, termites we had done nothing to stop? I dropped the probe and groaned. Focus on the parts you understand, Lacey-girl, I told myself. What Pop is doing—did—is about to do—is wrong.

"How are you picking the time?" Elly asked when I got back to the van.

"He had just taken the Temporal Intervention class, remember? They teach you the best way to choose an insertion point is to determine a major event that would have kept the residents away on a specific day, like a holiday or a wedding."

"August first?"

"You got it. It's probably how he got the idea. And he can't have gone too far back, or the damage to the house would have been worse." I programmed in August 1, 1991, my parents' wedding day. I pressed the button to send the probe, and let out a breath when the device complied. It wasn't supposed to work without a fresh permit code. Add tampering with a Temporal Intervention Device to my pop's rap sheet.

The probe checked out, and I started down the ladder. "Good luck," Elly called from the open van.

I turned off my headlamp before I pressed the button on my belt, and I arrived in 1991 in total darkness. Eventually I had to stop holding my breath, but I was still listening and straining my eyes. What if Pop wasn't here? What if he hadn't done this house? Maybe this had been about money from the first trip, not revenge or stupid pride, and his first trip had been to one of the dozens of termite-mangled places we'd cleaned up over the years.

A crunching sound. I crept forward, feeling the wall with my gloved hand, and saw a faint glow ahead. I peered around the corner and saw Pop sitting on an overturned bucket, tipping back a box of Fiddle-Faddle to get the last crumbs. His back was to me.

"Pop?" I said softly, and he jumped, hit his head on the low ceiling and spun around, shining his headlamp in my face.

"Who the hell are you? What are you doing here?" he yelled.

"Pop, calm down! It's me, Lacey." I realized as I said it how ridiculous it must sound. To him, Lacey was a teenage girl he'd left at home listening to mopey music. "I'm grown up, I know it's a lot to understand, but I've come from the future. The future future, I mean."

He took a few steps toward me and blazed the lamp more closely on my features. "By God, it could be."

"It is, Pop. Look." I plucked at my coveralls and stretched out the embroidered patch so it was easier to read: "Tidwell and Daughter."

He sat down heavily on the bucket, and I turned on my own flashlight. Even sitting, he seemed bigger than I remembered, his barrel chest wider. His ramrod posture made him seem tall, immovable. But I'd come to move him.

"Pop, I know why you're here, and you can't do it."

He set his jaw. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I know you're luring termites to this house, and you have to stop."

He swept his brow with his hand. "That's why you're here?"

"Yes, Pop. I don't know why you think you're doing it—"

"For you! For you and Benny. The termite business has been slowing a bit, and I need to be able to provide for you."

"By cheating?"

"However I have to!"

"If this is just about money, why are you here now? Why 1991, not 1960, so the termites could really dig in? It's never just money in our family, is it? This is about respect, and proving to yourself that you aren't 'just an exterminator.'"

Pop shook his head, but he didn't say anything. I went down on my knees in the dirt and threw my arms around him. I could smell him even over the crawlspace smells: the peanut-popcorn, the aftershave that he used. Now Granddad shaved him and used his own stuff. I shut my eyes to keep from crying.

"You're not 'just an exterminator' to me, or to Benny. You're our Pop, and that's all we need from you."

"No," he muttered. "I need to leave you provided for."

"You need not to leave us at all." I looked up, and saw the look of confusion in his strangely young face. "They weren't kidding about temporal interventions being hard on your brain, Pop. You've been doing these side trips for decades—in my time—and five months ago you had an attack. Okay? You're not dead, but you're not *with* us any more. You think you're giving us this big golden future, but all you're doing is taking away our Pop."

"What do you want me to do?" he said.

"I want you to take your lumber and all your things and go home. Back to your time, and never do this again."

"But if I've been doing it for decades . . ."

"I'm not saying there won't be problems. Maybe there will be questions, maybe some doctors or accountants will fuss, but we'll get through it together, with a clear conscience. I'd rather have a pile of problems with you than a pile of money without."

Pop held my face out at arm's length, callused fingers on my chin. "I believe you, Lacey-girl. Tell me one thing, and I'll promise to never take this thing on another field trip. Just tell me, why are you an exterminator?"

I blinked. "Because I wanted to be. I wanted to help people, work in the dirt, see the places other people don't see. Why the hell wouldn't I want to be like you?"

When I got back to my time, I was relieved to see there weren't any major termite problems in the Farmer crawlspace, no matter how much I'd bent, folded, and spindled the timeline. I told myself it was my duty to spray and knock down the few tubes that were there, but my arms and legs were shaking, and I could hardly wait to close that crawlspace up and hop in the van.

"How did it go?" Elly said.

"I think it worked," I said. "But there's only one way to be sure."

I pulled the van up in front of our house, noting with mounting excitement that it now needed a new coat of paint. I stopped with my hand on the doorknob and listened. There was my Granddad's voice, raised in alarm or dudgeon. And then, patient and low, there was the soft music of my Pop's voice. I kicked off my boots and walked into the house that termites built. O

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WELCOME HOME

(THE NEBULAS SONG)

Words & music by Janis Ian

I learned the truth at seventeen
That Asimov and Bradbury
and Clarke were alphabetically
my very perfect A-B-C
While Algernon ran every maze,
and slow glass hurt my heart for days,
I sat and played a sweet guitar
while Martians grokked me from afar

Odd John was my only friend
among the clocks and Ticktockmen
while Anne McCaffrey's dragons roared
above the skies of Majipoor
Bukharan winds blew cold and sharp
and whispered to my secret heart
"You are no more alone
"Welcome home"

Tribbles came, and triffids went
Time got wrinkled, then got spent
Kirinyaga's spirits soared
and Turtledove re-wrote a war
While Scanners searched, and loved in vain
HAL 9000 went insane
and Brother Francis had an ass
whose wit and wile were unsurpassed

**Every story I would read
became my private history
as Zenna's People learned to fly
and Rachel loved until I cried
I spent a night at Whileaway
then Houston called me just to say
“You are no more alone
“so welcome home”**

**Who dreams a positronic man?
Who speaks of mist, and grass, and sand?
of Stranger Station's silent tombs?
of speech that sounds in silent rooms?
Who waters deserts with their tears?
Who sees the stars each thousand years?
Who dreams the dreams of kids like me,
whose only home is fantasy?**

**Let's drink a toast to ugly chickens,
Marley's ghost, and Ender Wiggins
Every mother's son of you,
and all your darling daughters, too
And when the aliens finally come,
we'll say to each and every one
“You are no more alone
“so welcome home
“Welcome home.”**

DUMMY TRICKS

R. Neube

On his new story for *Asimov's*, R. Neube says, "The great American philosopher, Homer J. Simpson, clearly illustrates how the human condition turns us into knots of insecurity on two feet. I have great hopes that in the future humanity will put that behind us, despite what my story suggests."

Hal Koenigson crawled from his sleeping bag, tunneling through the meter of snow that had drifted over it while he slept. Using his lame foot as a hook, he pulled his bag and knapsack to the surface.

Taking a deep breath and closing his eyes, Hal flipped open the visor of his helmet to taste the day. Cold lashed his flesh like a razor whip. It was going to be another day in paradise on the planet of New Tahiti.

He slammed the visor, waiting until the condensation thawed and was swept away by the dehumidifier of his envirsuit. Blind for the nonce, he exchanged his envirsuit's battery belt by feel.

Thoughts of breakfast raced through his head, only to be lost as he dug up his specimen case. He judged the temperature optimal for the preservation of the ice cobras he had harvested over the last two days—no harm taking a peek. His visor cleared as he opened the case; his first sight of the day became stalks of slime lichen cradled inside foam pockets. Delicate blooms, pale as a corpse, smiled at him. Each twenty centimeter bloom represented forty thousand dollars. The single fifty centimeter bloom would fetch ten times that from the brokers in Tesla Valley.

"It's never enough to prove my worth to the family," he muttered to the ice, to his doubts.

Shouldering his gear, he limped into the vast whiteness of the plateau, seven hundred thousand square kilometers of icelands. His Freemont family held the smallest holding, owning the right to harvest from twenty-five thousand hectares.

Only a desperate family would recruit you, Dummy, said the voice of doubt.

Still, it was a cheap price to pay to live in this land of wonder, of miracles.

Dummy. Half his "family" called him that to his face. He might be a dummy, he thought, though still bright enough to remember when he was a respected criminal. Still bright enough to remember when his body and mind functioned, instead of being a shambling wreck courtesy of sundry overdoses.

At least his brain damage had gifted him with one priceless asset—unlike 99.998 percent of the planet's population, Hal was immune to the Strumming, the electromagnetic season that drove humanity off the plateau for a fortnight each year. Normal humans, those who hadn't spent months in a drug-induced coma, or hadn't inherited the guanine riff on chromosome nine, went insane after a few days' exposure.

Hal nearly limped over the horizon, one of those illusions of the ice. Perched on the rim, he eyed kilometers of wasteland in a shallow bowl stretched below him. A hovercraft was parked down there, where no hover should be. He lifted his binoculars, seeking the family flag that should be painted on the vehicle. Each year before the

Strumming, the families of the plateau decided on new flags to distinguish their hovers from pirates.

No flag. It never ceased to amaze Hal Koenigson how often he forgot his rifle. Dummy.

The risk did not deter pirates invading the plateau when the natives fled to the lowlands to escape the Strumming. Criminals raced through the passes, gambling they could steal sufficient ice cobras to justify the danger. Often the thieves tarried, lost in their greed, or simply lost in the vastness once their instruments failed. Dummy would discover their hovercrafts years later, then imagine the stories the corpses within them might tell.

Dummy hiked to his hovercraft, cursing his negligence. It would have been so simple to snipe the rogues as they scrambled toward their vehicle. Pop, pop, pop.

It took Dummy six hours to reach his hover. Fifteen minutes later, he parked on the illusionary horizon, not ten meters from where he originally stood. That, too, was one of his talents. Folks with regular brains could not travel the arctic sameness without navigational aids; whereas a dummy could fly as straight as an arrow.

The pirate hover had vanished. The wind, a scant thirty klicks an hour, had covered its tracks—no concern to Dummy. Pirates didn't know where the cobras bloomed. At best, they had a map from the orbital satellite that had been scrawled upon by a disgruntled employee or a shunned ex-member of one of the plateau's corporate families. Most pirate data came from bars and alleys, from lies and legends.

Dummy guessed the pirates would be heading toward Mesa, Grandma Ravenson's home. That she was the richest woman on the planet, maybe the galaxy, would draw them. Dummy had heard the bar room bullshit in his younger days, how hectares of ice cobras surrounded her mesa.

Forty minutes later, he found a hollow where a patch of ice cobras had been vandalized. His anger boiled. None of the maimed lichen had been within a decade of blooming. It would take a century for the lichen to recover.

Three hours later, he caught sight of the pirate hover. Hal triggered the forty millimeter cannon in the turret atop his hover, scoring a solid hit on the pirate. They skewed. He skewed. They both maxed their engines. Trouble was, the pirates rode a Mark IX hover with a hefty six pack of DeHaviland blowers. Two Mark IXs rusted inside the Freemont barn during the Strumming, but Hal's family did not trust him with their new vehicles. Hal cruised in an ancient Mark VII, expendable, just like Dummy.

The pirates careened down a gentle slope into Kelly Rift, one of the major thoroughfares of the plateau. Hal ran south along its edge. The pirates slowed to dodge boulders. In normal times, a hover's master computer used radar to evade the obstacles. However, the Strumming created false radar signals and shifted true ones.

The ice hated humans.

He imagined the thieves pointing at the map, bellowing how the rift looked like the best way to escape, only to be forced to slow again by yet another boulder forest.

Once he got ahead of them, Hal fired five shells into the opposite wall of the rift. It failed to trigger the avalanche he'd hoped for, but tumbling rocks inspired the crooks to sweep up a convenient arroyo to escape. After they vanished on the opposite side of the rift, Hal crossed the rift fifty klicks later via an ancient meteorite crater.

As the pirates fled across Tula Plain he idled near another illusionary horizon, hidden behind an ice ridge. 'Twas simple to ram the thieves as they raced by. Pegged the sucker between the number five and six blowers; Hal's two and a half ton steel plow penetrated the pirate's hull.

The plow stuck inside the pirate. Both vehicles slipped over the rim of the basin. Blowers screamed. Metal screamed. Hal screamed. A basalt boulder studding the slope of the snowy depression exploded into gravel when the pirate smacked it.

Sheared the pirate sideways, ripping off the plow blade of Hal's vehicle, sending him spinning. Hal killed his blowers, skipped a few times, then opened the throttle to regain control.

Whereupon the aft of the pirate scooted up a boulder's forgiving incline, momentarily defying gravity until the nose-heavy, forty-ton mass made a dive into a snow bank. That started the hovercraft flipping.

"I just meant to kill you. N-n-not rip you apart," he muttered.

As he drove to the top of the basin, Hal watched the pirate flipping to the bottom. Two of the hovercraft's blowers tore free, making their own paths down the slope.

He parked beyond the rim, consuming stale bread to soak up an ocean of stomach acid. Stepping outside, he scanned the depression. Scattered metal was already being covered by blown snow. Clouds the color of bloody moss scudded from the south.

Storm. Hal changed the battery belt of his envirsuit the instant he went inside. An alarm announced circuit breakers being thrown as the storm intensified the Strumming. He took the reactor offline.

Slipping into the pilot's seat, he carefully entered the location of the wreck in his private log. The effort stressed him. His right arm dropped to his side, twitching. Drool drained down the trembling side of his mouth. His right leg went numb.

Drug-induced Parkinson's was the diagnosis of the doctors. It wasn't accurate, but close enough for the medical establishment to issue pills. The fit subsided as he rounded through relaxation exercise nine. His carcass seemed one painful tingle as his brain resumed picking up signals that he hoped came from his central nervous system and not the Strumming.

The atmosphere was snowing when he stepped outside. The oily feel—not that he could "feel" through his gloves—of the snow suggested it was a complex hydrocarbon, the first compounds to freeze out of the air, no doubt pollution from the industrial complexes of Tesla Valley far to the south. Soon, the carbon monoxide would rain. Relentless winds would howl from the south, replacing the air being made solid.

A glance at the damaged prow of his hovercraft chilled Hal through his protective garb. Sara and Kevin would detonate at the next family meeting. Again. The Freemont leaders would lecture him about wasting the resources of their family. Dummy.

It wasn't his fault his hover always got banged up. He cruised a million klicks a year, of course his hover took damage.

Everybody thank Dummy, Kevin would say, *for making us work harder.*

"Thanks, Dummy," he muttered before the voice of doubt did.

Motion caught his attention as the storm whimsically diminished. He seized his binoculars, focusing on the wreck. Two, three, no, five dots moved down there. He laughed in relief, so glad they hadn't been pulverized in the wreck.

He went inside the hover to fetch his rifle and do the job humanely. Zeiss Corporation on Luna manufactured the finest optical systems ever to grace a 20mm Colt rifle. On other worlds, the rifles were used to splatter aliens weighing half a ton. Hal sighted the targets, a four klick shot according to the laser rangefinder.

As he waited for the scope's computer to figure the variables, his right eye twitched. His numb arm dropped away. Still, he couldn't stop looking as a trio of.... No, no, no, he thought. Three children dragged bags and boxes from the wreck. A lanky figure worked on the shroud of the aft reactor. Hal knew what the person was doing, an old ice trick—the shroud made a corking sled in an emergency.

"It's a family," he said, though the words came out wrong courtesy of his dead right side.

Two adults, plus three children, a real family, not a corporate mockery like his Freemonts.

"The idiots are going to try to hike out of here, fifteen hundred klicks through the worst Strumming of the decade."

Clenching his eyes shut, he avoided a seizure by running through his relaxation exercises. When his eyes opened, the snow had returned.

The plucky family now dragged the shroud across the waste. It was piled high with gear.

Be humane, Dummy, said Doubt.

The rifle called to him. The scope declared it would now be a six klick shot. Still easy.

A real family. Hal had been raised on the streets of Tesla. A foul-tempered drunk who chased him with a knife was the first parental memory he could access from that dim past.

The kids helped push the ersatz sled.

When his hover suffered a fire last year, his Freemont family dallied nine days before coming to tow him home. No one apologized for the delay. Instead, he got the lecture. Did they thank him for tripling the harvest? No, they thought letting him join Freemont sufficed as a reward.

Dummy blinked the tears clear. The family moved quite well. Usually pirates flailed in the snow. One of them must hail from the plateau. The mother, he guessed, from the way she shuffled effortlessly through the snow.

Ball lightning rolled on either side of Dummy. The scope went dark. The opposite rim of the depression fluoresced. Clouds charged over him, so low he could touch them. Wind battered. Dragging the rifle, he crawled to his hovercraft. Even inside, he could feel the Strumming, described by some as the same monotonous note roaring from a giant guitar, a hundred times a minute.

Hal tried to eat some crackers. Tried to sleep. The wind shook the hovercraft, nearly lifted its thirty-two tons. Visibility plunged to zero.

Did the family have enough time to race back to the shelter of their wreck before the storm?

The wind scooted the hover backward a few meters, nearly knocking him off his feet.

"Maybe it'd be better if the storm wasted 'em. It's one thing to blow away lowlifes, another thing to wipe out a real family."

The storm raged for an eternity of playing solitaire. The barometer informed him when the storm waned. He changed his battery pack, then plugged used belts into the recharger before cleaning his rifle.

As soon as visibility eked to half a klick, he left. Snow boots expanded as his foot dropped, shrank as his foot rose, allowing him to move with deceptive speed to the wreck.

"Where are they?" shrieked the child huddled inside the wreck.

Hard to judge, given the baggy envirsuit, but Hal guessed the kid was ten. Maybe a she.

"I am Hal Koenigson of the Freemont clan."

"Where are they?" shrieked the child, so loud the staticky radio carried the words like feedback.

"If you promise to stay here, I will find them," he said.

The child screamed, "NO!" and started to run. Hal tripped her, sat on her back. Fishing through his necessary bag, he found a roll of duct tape to cocoon the prisoner. He changed the child's battery belt, wired it to a second belt in case he was gone longer than expected.

Leaving the wreck, Hal was cheered by the crystal clear air. It was one of those rare hours when the wind ceased. In the distance, the ersatz sled stood on end like a tombstone where the wind had harpooned it into the ice.

The first corpse was a child, larger than the one inside the wreck. The kid had

been running toward the hover, right into the wind. The blowing ice had torn him apart. His helmet appeared sandblasted; his envirsuit's kevlar skin shredded.

Further on, Hal encountered a massive gouge in the ice. A trail of boxes, bags, and tins sprayed six hundred meters to the ersatz sled. The first major gust had frisbeed the sled across the bowl, where it landed and made the gouge. Its next skip speared it into the ground, lengthwise to part the winds. Otherwise, gusts would have knocked it down.

As Hal approached the sled, one of the dangling lumps resolved into the father, still shrouded in the ropes he used to tow the sled. When the wind had taken the sled airborne, he hadn't been able to escape the bonds.

Hal turned around, reasoning the mother was the veteran of the plateau. She would have burrowed into the snow as disaster overtook them.

Shrugging the rifle off his back, he slowly zigzagged back. Seemed weird to see his tracks, so rarely did the wind allow them to exist for more than a few seconds. Reaching the original gouge, he crouched, staring with the infinite patience of a consummate cobra harvester.

Time meant little to Hal. Hours could vanish with ease. However, the four hour increments marking the useful span of the battery belt were the church bell knells of his day. His helmet's warning lights blinked, he unwrapped a spare battery belt from the strap of his necessary bag. The exchange took seconds.

The exercise made him miss the heads popping free of the snow. The duo were already standing when he looked up. His rifle snapped to his shoulder. He flipped the scope aside. At eighty meters, it was unnecessary.

His finger trembled as his chest tightened. He exhaled slowly.

A real family.

Without lowering his rifle, he reached to the neck of his helmet, activating the external speaker. With the Strumming, however, subsided, the suit radio would never reach that far.

"Hands in the air," he yelled.

The two figures spun to face him.

"No, no, no," he screamed as the smaller one pulled a pistol. Hal shifted his aim from the mother.

"No!"

The kid fired. A chunk of ice scant centimeters from Hal's foot exploded.

"Stop!"

Dummy, screamed Doubt.

The second bullet smacked his necessary bag.

His finger did not tremble this time. The Colt rifle slammed into his shoulder. Thirty grams of lead flew. When the bullet struck the kevlar outer layer of the kid's envirsuit, it shattered. A few fragments were stopped by the suit, but the majority tore into the body. The petite figure kicked at the sky before smacking into the snow. The gun in the kid's hand blew a hole in the snow.

The wind began to blow as the mother threw herself onto the corpse.

"No," he repeated.

A keening sound filled his earphones.

"I found another child in the wreck. She's okay."

Mother Pirate grabbed the handgun. Hal aimed. She aimed. His trembling finger rested on the trigger. They stared at one another.

"The other child didn't make it back to the hover. I think it was a him, about halfway back. I don't think he suffered."

Came the keening once again.

Dummy, said Doubt.

"Please," Hal sobbed. "Hasn't there been enough killing?"

She fired. He knew the bullet was going high. The mother fired again. A plume of ice rose ten meters in front of Hal.

"Please," he screamed.

A blast of wind screamed into the bowl. Instinct threw Dummy down before it hit. The mother fired until the baleful breeze skittered her head over heels.

Hal never lost his aim. The mother had lost her weapon. She clawed her belt, producing a screwdriver, waving it at Hal.

He toggled. "Please. Think about your daughter."

She leapt to her feet and charged. Running on the plateau was an iffy prospect. Snow boots simply could not compensate so quickly. She crunched about ten meters before plunging into the snow up to her neck when the boots failed.

"I will be at the wreck. If you must die, I'll kill you there." Hal casually strolled to the wreck, sprinkled with the occasional leap onto the surface as the wind bellowed.

Perhaps the ice felt sorry for him.

Dummy, said Doubt.

After exchanging the captive's battery belts, Hal took a long drink from his suit's reservoir, though it tasted like the recycled sweat it was. Thoughts of eating vanished as he glimpsed the vault in the back of the wreck. He worked a little hammer magic on its lock. Inside was a single cobra, immature, barely eight centimeters. Pathetic. A real harvester would have left it, noting its location so he/she could return ten years later for a proper bloom.

Maybe two thousand bucks worth. To have the ice slaughter your family for such a pathetic cobra. . . .

He sorted through the debris, finding a pillowcase filled with pictures. Some showed the family with infant twins. Digging deeper, he found a ream of legal paperwork. The family had sold their twins to make the down payment on the hover.

"There are no perfect families," he whispered.

Hal sat down hard, disappointed, feeling that familiar clawing at his spine. Closing his eyes, he slipped into his calming exercises. Only needed two before the threat of a seizure subsided.

He opened his eyes in time to see the mother rise from her daughter's side and shoot him twice. At the range of four meters, she could not miss.

"Ouch," he said, rubbing his chest. The envirsuit's kevlar had stopped the handgun's small bullets, but their energy had not been fully dissipated. "Ouch," he repeated as the woman fiddled with the weapon. The tsunami from his adrenal glands made his brain ache. She cleared the jam.

He grabbed a crumpled steel bracket and threw it. Bounced off her helmet, ricocheted off a wall to smack her shoulder. "Ouch," she said.

"I ought to kill you for selling the twins."

She staggered backward, tripped over the kid, and made a sitcom pratfall. The gun went off. A hiss of gas erupted from the child's life support pack where the bullet struck. They both scrambled.

Hal clawed the protective layer off the child's pack, noting the material had already been torn, doubtlessly by the initial wreck. The bullet had penetrated the pump responsible for inhaling the Everest-thin atmosphere of the plateau for concentration to a breathable level.

She elbowed Hal out of the way. He started to dash to the aft of the hover, to grab a new pump. Easy fix. Except it wasn't his hover. He spun, went to the airlock, hoping to find a spare pack. Most of the airlock had been ripped away, but the storage locker was there. Prying it open, he found it empty. The family hadn't been able to afford spare parts.

"We have to get her to my ride. NOW!" he screamed.

She tapped a dial. "Too late. There's only two minutes of air in her reservoir."

His fingers dug through his necessary bag before his mind caught up with them. The emergency tent was the size of a book. Unfurling it, he attached a parasite line to his own pack, inflating the tent.

"Get inside with her, attach your parasite—"

"We don't have—"

He grunted in dismay before detaching his own line to give to her. "Get inside. I'll bring my hover down here."

She glanced at the rifle, belatedly noticing it leaned against one of the seats, centimeters from her hand. Her eyes locked on Hal.

"Go ahead, maybe you can kill me. Win or lose, your daughter dies. Get her into the tent." He sidled to the rifle, shouldered it.

He marched across the ice, allowing the wind to catch his back during gusts to ski him a few effortless meters. It made for a long hour before he could return to the wreck. After parking beside the wreck, he locked up everything that resembled a weapon, including his toolbox.

Bringing his shivering guests aboard, he decided they were too pathetic to be treated as prisoners. He prepared soup after insisting they shower. Gave them clean jumpsuits. The kid had to roll up the sleeves and legs. He ignored the silence as long as he could.

"I am Hal Koenigson," he said.

"I'm Misiha Laurel Crane," said the kid, fingers raking soggy hair.

The mother glowered as she had been since he had forced her to abandon her pistol and tools outside the airlock.

"What? Am I the villain here? Am I the pirate?" he asked.

"Crystal Tomani-Crane," said the mother.

"Tomani? I once knew a Bentam Tomani."

"You knew Uncle Bent?"

Hal was taken aback. The woman looked older than him, yet he recalled Bentam as a kid who lost his ear in a drunken brawl and peacocked around like a gangster.

"Good ole One Ear," said Hal.

"He's dead. TB-3 broke out last winter, real bad. It took out half the people who lived in the north slope." She exhaled long and hard, deflating. "We sold the twins, robbed cemeteries, my Clark murdered five losers for hire, all to get the money to come to this icy hell."

"You've been here before. I saw you on the ice," said Hal.

"Me?" she shrieked with laughter. "First time in my life, but I was raised on stories of the Mesa. My parents worked the plateau for twenty years, wage slaves of the Ravensons. They lost toes and fingers to ice. For what? To make the old witch richer than God?"

"Why become pirates? Y'all had a good contract murder business. Honest work. Yet you came here to get killed. Why?"

"We had to do something for our children. Earn enough to have a decent life for them."

"My God," he groaned. "Just making a down payment on the hover costs a fortune. You could have lived well without it."

"My children deserved better."

Hal choked on the woman's words, his mind's eye showing the dead kid buried waist-deep in the snow. Showed the kid he had shot. Showed him the scarecrow dangling from the tombstone of a sled.

He said, "I know a biologist who estimated there were less than a hundred

hectares of cobras on the whole plateau. The biggest field I ever saw was fifteen square meters. You expected to find wealth in seven hundred thousand square kilometers of ice? You expected—" He choked back the tears.

Hal went to the cockpit, buckling in as he activated the reactors and blowers. The woman paced behind him.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I'll give you a lift off the plateau. The Rileys have a little homestead at the base of Kuller Pass. That's where y'all were hiking toward, whether you knew it or not. Of course, the Strumming would have killed you long before you reached it. The Rileys are farmers, nice folks. They supply the plateau clans with meat and vegetables. They always need extra workers. It ain't much, but it's better than burying the two of you up here."

She didn't ask why.

Hal was grateful. Dummy didn't have an answer.

It just felt right. ○

ALL THAT MATTERS

**It is always cold out here
where the sun is barely more
than any of the distant stars
we will never reach.
Why we are here,
in the outer planets,
I can't fathom.
The depth of the darkness
makes our challenges here
minuscule against
these depths we can't plumb.
But, we are here,
and the machines
and the chemical processes
which continue our manifest destiny
to control the solar system
go on and on.
And we continue,
taking our daily light bed therapy
and hoping against hope,
somehow,
all this matters.
—Roger Dutcher**

FRANKENSTEIN, FRANKENSTEIN

Will McIntosh

A nominee for both the Hugo and Nebula awards this year for his Asimov's Readers' Award winning short story "Bridesicle" (January 2009), Will McIntosh's work has also appeared in *Science Fiction: Best of the Year 2008 and 2009; Strange Horizons; Unplugged: The Year's Best Online Fiction 2009; Interzone*, and many other venues. A New Yorker transplanted to the rural south, Will is a psychology professor at Georgia Southern University, where he studies internet dating and how people's TV, music, and movie choices are affected by recession and terrorist threat. Will is also the father of very young twins. The author's latest story, which explores the complexities of human relationships and the repercussions of experiments that go beyond "what mankind was meant to know," is a perfect tale for our slightly spooky October/November issue.

Waiting in the closed casket was the worst part. The prickly dread invoked by the dark box was far worse than the wide-eyed shrieks that would ensue when I emerged. Darby had assured me that I would grow accustomed to the casket, but I thought that unlikely. Darby had never been in one.

I was clutching my hands across my chest like a corpse positioned for viewing, and I repositioned them at my sides. I listened to Darby's patter and to the noise of the crowd, trying to relax.

"Dear patrons, ladies, gentlemen." Darby's baritone vibrated the coffin. The railroad spike lodged in my head was pressed to the side of the coffin, and it picked up the vibrations and caused my skull to hum. "I can read it on your faces—some of you are skeptical, even amused. I don't blame you. I can assure you that your amusement will be short-lived. I can also assure you that Doctor Victor Frankenstein was not just a character in a book, because he was my grandfather." This brought scattered laughter from the crowd. "Go ahead, laugh! But Mary Shelley was not a purveyor of fictions with a tall imagination, but a biographer who lost her courage. The proof is in this box." I was prepared for the rap on the coffin this time. It had startled me during the first few performances. "My grandfather retrieved the monster's head from a railroad worker who suffered a terrible and fatal accident when a charge he was setting in stone exploded prematurely, driving a thirty-inch steel spike into his face just below the cheekbone . . ." I could picture Darby touching the spot below his

cheek to show the audience where the spike had entered my head, ". . . and out the top of his head. It is lodged there still, as you shall see."

Indeed, it was lodged there still. Our meal ticket.

"His limbs were gathered from amputees in exchange for the cost of their medical expenses. Poor souls. Victims of accidents, infection, gout. His heart is the heart of a black bear, his kidneys . . . well, that is enough detail, don't you think? Grandfather was called a ghoul by those who misunderstood his work, and I remain sensitive about that portrayal."

My anus began to itch. It was an unfortunate spot, because it would be no easier to slake the itch when I was out of the box and under a hundred stares than it was to reach the spot while still in the box. I tried to ignore it.

"So, enough of my oration, eh? Would you like to meet the Frankenstein monster?"

There were shouts of assent, whistles, scattered applause.

"All right, then," Darby boomed. "I shall summon him." He paused for dramatic effect. "Rise! Rise my creation, my demon spawn, my pride, my shame. Show yourself."

I counted one, two, three, allowing the tension to rise. Then I pushed on the plush padded underside of the casket lid, allowing a crack of light to rush in. I gave my eyes a moment to adjust, then threw off the lid. It clattered to the wooden stage.

I rose to a sitting position, rotated stiffly to face the crowd.

Smiles froze, shrunk to tight rictus "Os." Mouths snapped shut; others fell open.

Shrieks and shouts ensued, filling the tent. A woman in the front row lost the strength in her legs; the gentleman accompanying her was too sluggish in his attempt to catch her and she dropped to the straw-covered ground.

"Do not be alarmed," Darby shouted over the din, waving his arms. "The monster will follow my commands. There is no danger as long as you do not approach him." Yes, do not approach too closely, for while some of the long, jagged scars that swept across my torso were real, others were drawn in before each show, along with the lamp black under my eyes to make them appear more deep-set in my long face.

I pressed my palm against the edge of the casket and rose. It was important that I rise slowly, drawing myself up, up, as if I would never stop, the three inch boosters in my thick boots and the angle of the stage making me appear impossibly tall.

"My Dear God," someone cried out.

"It can't be. It just can't be."

"But it is," Darby added. "Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Frankenstein's monster."

I pointed a hooked index finger at the audience and howled. We had worked hard on the howl—it was a most disconcerting sound. Half a dozen people turned and fled the tent; most of those who remained backed up a few paces.

"It's a fake, it has to be," a suspended oaf said from the end of a row. His arms were folded tightly. "It's two ends of the spike, stuck to him with something."

"Come see for yourself." Darby stepped off the stage, approached the skeptical rube. "Come." He tugged the man's elbow. The man allowed himself to be drawn onto the stage, his bravado melting as Darby turned him toward the sea of faces in the audience.

Darby commanded me to sit, then encouraged the skeptic to examine the spike. The lights dimmed (in case he took a closer look at my scars, though we'd found that the spike captivated most people's full attention). Cautiously, the oaf stepped forward, leaned toward me to look at the spike.

"Touch it. Go ahead." Darby said.

The oaf reached out, pushed at the spike jutting out of the top of my head. As he drew his trembling fingers away I let my head droop to an angle where he could see the spike disappearing into my skull.

He cried out and fled, running right out of the tent.

Darby cautioned me that when you lie, absorb as much truth into the lie as possible. It was true, then, that I acquired the spike in an accident while working for the railroad. As far as I can tell, it caused no damage to my mind. In fact most of my education had come since the accident, when I, weary of terrifying women and young children, sought sanctuary in a cabin in the wilderness of British Columbia. But do not imagine a bearded mountain man hunting for his supper and skinning it with a hunting knife. I ate mostly beans and potatoes. I lived off the largesse of my younger brother and spent my days reading.

I read Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's novel, but it was Darby, not I, who formulated the Frankenstein Plan as we sat drinking in a pub. Manual labor was beyond me because of my injuries, so when loneliness finally drove me back to the world, I had to rely on my intellect. And deceit.

"The skeptic tonight was perfect, don't you think?" Darby asked. He sat at the tiny secretary by the window, counting the evening's receipts.

"If he'd had a tail, it would have been tucked between his legs," I answered.

Darby chuckled appreciatively. "By the time we arrive at the fair in Chicago, word will have preceded us. We'll draw five hundred a show."

There was a knock at the door. "Mr. Darby? May I speak with you?"

Darby went to the front room of the wagon and opened the door a crack. I heard a man introduce himself as Dexter Wilson—an inventor interested in animism, he said. He wanted to discuss technique. He was the sort of man we avoided—one who could tell the difference between scars caused by shale and wire driven across the skin by an explosion, and surgical scars resulting from the attachment of sundry limbs to a torso.

Darby kept the door nearly closed. "My grandfather was the genius, not I. I am neither a doctor nor a researcher, only nursemaid to a monster. I wasn't even present when the monster was created."

"Ah!" Wilson said, "But the monster was." I heard the unmistakable rasp of currency being handled; it is a sound to which I have grown attuned in my new life. "If I could have just a few minutes' audience with him—I assume he can speak?"

"Oh yes, he can speak," Darby replied. He accepted the bills, then held up a finger. "There is one condition. You must keep a fair distance from him. He tires at night, and can become . . . disagreeable."

"Of course, I understand," Wilson said. The excitement in his tone was unmistakable.

I snuffed out the large lamp, leaving only a small one burning, and retreated to my bed, drawing the blanket to my chin. The door squealed open and Darby entered, followed by Wilson, who was clutching his hat at his waist, his eyes blazing. "This man would like to speak to you," Darby said. "He means you no harm."

I nodded understanding, breathing heavily through my nose to give my presence a beastly air. Darby left us alone, closing the door so that the room was thick with shadow. I did not offer him a seat, but only stared.

"Can you tell me what you remember from your first day?" he whispered. His demeanor bordered on reverent, like a man in a church who has glimpsed his god.

"My first day?" I replied, an octave lower than my voice would produce of its own accord.

"Yes. The day you were made."

I grunted, feigning amusement. "I remember pain. Bandages."

He took an eager step forward. "What was around you? Was there a storm outside?"

Ah. He had read Mrs. Shelley's book, had probably worn the binding to threads. I rolled my eyes up, as if searching my memories.

"No," I answered.

"No?" Wilson said. He swept oily hair out of his eyes. "Then what provided the spark of life?"

I had grown skilled at fabricating memories. The key was to stay in the vicinity of Shelley's account, but to drift, thus suggesting I had information she did not. "I remember great wheels turning. The sound of rushing water. Blocks of black iron everywhere—"

"Magnets?" Wilson interrupted, breathless.

Magnets? If he liked, they could be magnets. "Yes. Magnets."

"Good, good. What else?"

"Strange fluids. In my mouth, running through tubes into my heart."

"Did the fluids have a color?"

"White," I said. "Milky."

Wilson looked around, lunged at the tiny desk Darby used to keep records. He flipped a sheet of paper covered in figures, reached for the pen and ink and scribbled furiously. He wrote as if he'd forgotten I was there. Finally he glanced at me. "Please pardon me. Things escape me if I don't write them down." He rose from the table, the chair scraping. "What else do you remember?"

Wasn't that enough? Nothing else. Wheels. Tubes. Bandages. A man standing over me."

"Doctor Frankenstein. What was he like?" Wilson asked, breathless.

"His neck broke easily," I growled, flexing my fingers. Another variation from Mrs. Shelley's account, but I was here and she was not.

Wilson ducked at the waist and took a step toward the door. "Thank you. Thank you for indulging me." He took another step backward, kicking the table leg and almost stumbling. "Your mere existence is all the encouragement I need." With that he turned and rushed out.

I shook my head, chuckled. Magnets and white fluids. Yes, that should do it. Or was it dynamite and a railroad spike that made the monster?

The wagon groaned to a halt. I slept well when the wagon was moving, but the pleasure of sleeping to the wagon's rocking was always offset by the jolt and jarring silence that woke me.

I drew back the curtain a sliver and peered out the open window. We were settled in the weeds beside a stream. Darby chose a spot close to water whenever possible—streams and lakes cooled my nerves far better than any drugstore potion.

I reclined back onto my narrow bed, listening to the water, until I heard voices outside. It never took long for people from the town to notice our colorful enclosed wagon with its enticing images painted on the sides. The first to come were usually children; they would run and spread the word to their parents and soon we would have a curious crowd.

Soon I heard Darby out there doing his part, selling the spectacle of the Frankenstein monster. I rose, admired his skill from the window. He was gesticulating wildly toward our wagon, his eyes stretched wide as if to illustrate just how awe-stricken his audience would be if they paid to see the show tonight.

"Hold on a minute," one of the townspeople said, cutting Darby off mid-gesticulation. "You're saying Frankenstein's monster is in that wagon?" He pointed in my direction; I ducked behind the curtain.

"I am indeed," Darby said.

"Well that ain't possible," the man said. He shook his head almost mournfully.

"I realize it's hard to believe, that the Frankenstein mon—"

The man cut Darby off. "It ain't possible because the Frankenstein monster is already here. I paid a dime to see him last night, over at the fairgrounds."

I was sure I must have misunderstood the man. Darby sputtered, lost for words.

"That's right," the man insisted. He tugged the brim of his hat to negotiate a better fit. "I don't know who you got in that wagon, but last night I seen the Frankenstein monster with my own eyes."

"He's big as a house, scars all over himself," a stooped old woman added, spreading her hands to illustrate the creature's size.

A giggle escaped me. I clapped a palm over my mouth, muffling my laughter to soft snorts. Someone else was running the same ruse? Oh, what irony. Perhaps there were also several headless horsemen sharing a pint in the local pub.

"Well, let me assure you," Darby said, regaining his composure, "I am in the company of the Frankenstein monster; whoever this, this poseur is, he is not who he claims to be." He stormed away in a huff, slamming the wagon door shut for good measure.

"This is not funny," he said when he saw me laughing.

I opened my mouth and let my laughter wash over him. Let the townspeople hear it, what was one town? "Of course it is. I've never heard anything so funny."

Darby pulled a skillet out of the cabinet, retrieved half a dozen eggs and the sack of ham from the pantry. "It's embarrassing is what it is. And what if this other Frankenstein monster is heading south, and has already hit all of the towns between here and Chicago?" Darby froze, held up his hand. "What's that?" Fresh shouts lit the air in the distance. We went outside to investigate.

A large enclosed wagon—larger than our own—lumbered toward us, leaving a plume of dust in its wake. Painted on the side of the wagon in ornate gold and black lettering was *The Frankenstein Monster*, and below, in smaller lettering: *The Legend Lives and Breathes*. Townspeople hurried alongside the wagon, their excited conversation drifting toward us in incoherent snippets.

"Oh, good lord," Darby muttered.

"They didn't waste any time, did they?" I folded my arms across my chest. "How do you want to play this?"

Darby glanced around, as if seeking someplace to hide. "Why don't you duck into the wagon? If they see you now, they won't pay to see you tonight."

"I doubt they're going to spend money to see a second Frankenstein monster when they've just seen one."

Darby nodded. "You're probably right. Let's see what we're dealing with. Likely their monster is a complete fix-up—wax fangs and papier-mâché deformities. Unless they seem the sort who'll get nasty, I'll expose them, then let a few onlookers examine your spike to see that it's real."

Ah, my spike—the ultimate trump-card in any monster authenticity showdown. I gave a small nod of agreement. A small nod is all I can manage before the part of the spike jutting out beneath my chin presses into my chest.

The wagon rolled to a stop beside ours. The people trotting alongside it reacted to the sight of me; I kept my eyes on the wagon door. It swung open: a midget in a natty red suit stepped out and descended the wagon's three steps with some effort.

When he looked up and caught sight of me, his face flushed; he stumbled on the uneven ground but recovered quickly. By the time he reached us, he appraised me with a calculating eye that belied little fear.

He looked me up and down theatrically and harrumphed. "You call this a monster?" He waved a dismissive hand at me. "I'll show you a monster." He turned and faced his wagon, raised his hands in the air. "Come out, my friend, and meet the man who claims to be you!"

We watched the door, waiting, our silence so deep I could hear the brook burbling down in the gully.

Finally, the door creaked open. The man who opened it had to turn sideways, and duck, to fit through. He didn't need the stairs (his feet might not even fit on them); instead he stepped straight to the ground. His shirtless body was both beautiful and horrible: he bulged with slabs of muscle, but his flesh was rippled with waves of terrible scars, raised and pink at the seams. Bands of scars encircled his arms, one at each bicep and forearm. A ragged scar split his face right down the middle, and one of his eyes was missing. His remaining eye was deep-set beneath a brow like a cliff, his nose jagged like a mountain ridge.

He stormed forward, stopping a step closer than his diminutive keeper, and glared at me. I am a tall man, yet when this man faced me I was eye-level with his neck. He opened his mouth to speak, though I expected nothing more than a growl to come from that throat.

"I don't recall seeing *you* the day Victor Frankenstein made *me*." I flinched with surprise at the clear, deep baritone of his speech. "Maybe he cobbled you together from the leftovers, hm?" He folded his arms across his chest, his biceps flexing into cannonballs.

"Perhaps," I answered, my heart pounding, "but if so, at least they were human scraps, not pieces of oxen and steer from his larder." This brought scattered laughter from the onlookers.

He took a step forward, halving the distance between us. I tensed, expecting him to lunge, but he only stared down at me, one thick eyebrow raised. "Is that so? Yet I'm not the one who sports his very own meat hook." The crowd roared with laughter; the giant reached out, grinning, and tried to grasp the spike. I jerked backward and he clutched only air. He surged forward, reaching for it again; I shoved him hard in the chest while bobbing my head from side to side to keep the spike out of his grasp. From the few times I had been careless enough to catch the spike in a doorway or strike it on a sturdy branch, I knew a strong blow to the spike could snap my neck. I shoved him a second time, then a third with all my might, and only managed to move him slightly.

Suddenly he stopped, and let his hands drop to his sides. Although I wanted nothing more than to flee into my wagon and latch the door, I stood my ground. The monster stared at me, silent except for the rush of air through his nose. His gaze was disconcerting, the empty eye socket like an open wound in his face.

"Perhaps we should settle this tonight," the midget said, stepping forward. He turned to face the crowd. More people had arrived, and even more were hurrying across the field. "What do you think? Shall the monsters battle to decide who has the right to bear the name Frankenstein?"

The crowd roared approval. My plan was already formed: I would agree to fight him, and as soon as the crowd dispersed we would climb into the wagon and get far away from this town as fast as the horses could draw us.

"What do you say? Shall we settle this like men?" The monster said.

And then he winked.

I was almost certain it had been a wink—his expression had softened for a moment, and a look that bordered on camaraderie had lit his broad face. Now the look was gone, the grimace of anger returned.

He winked again—this one almost theatrical.

"Well?" he bellowed.

I tried to mask my astonishment and match his fierce expression. "All right."

The crowd cheered, some tossed hats in the air. The midget raised his hands and shouted to be heard over the crowd. "The battle will take place at seven sharp at the fair grounds, admission only fifty cents—a bargain for such a spectacle!"

A wide grin spread across the monster's face, filling his eye with a warmth and humanity that had been absent a moment before. He and his manager lingered while the townspeople hurried off to spread the word. I was still unsure what the monster had in mind, and was keeping my original plan to flee in reserve as Darby went to fetch chairs.

"Graves Anderson." The giant offered his hand.

"Phineas Gage."

He clapped me on the shoulder. "We gave them quite a show, eh?"

I shook my head in bewilderment. "You had me fooled as well. I was close to fleeing for the safety of my wagon."

"You? Never. You've the courage of a dragon—I can see it in your eyes." He clapped me again, then turned to join the others. The midget tossed him a shirt; he caught it and pulled it on.

Darby had set out four cups as well as the chairs, and was already pouring a finger of whiskey for our other guest. The little man's name was Yorkie Gunn. I asked after the origins of his unusual first name, and he replied that it originated from his mother's bad taste, eliciting laughter all around.

We talked about life on the road, compared notes on how to draw crowds, shared stories of comical flights from towns on the few occasions when our ruses were exposed. Finally, we got down to the business at hand.

"It was a brilliant plan," Darby said. "You're quick thinkers, for certain. Everyone in town will pay to see this."

"I can't take any credit," Yorkie said, pointing at Graves. "It was this man's quick thinking. We had no idea what we'd find here. There's another fellow in town, claiming he has the real Frankenstein's monster," they told us. I've never been so surprised."

"What are the odds?" I said.

"Great minds think alike," Graves offered, holding out his cup.

I tapped it with mine. "Indeed." I took a gulp, enjoyed the candied burn of the whiskey. "So what exactly do you have in mind? We throw phantom punches, grapple in the dust?"

Graves grinned. "At fifty cents a head we'll have to put on a better show than that, but that's the general idea. I'll pull my punches. I can't promise you won't come away bruised, but I'll avoid blows to vulnerable spots, especially that spike." He paused, frowning. "How on earth did that happen, if I may ask?"

It was refreshing to have someone ask directly, and I described how I had been using the tamping iron now lodged in my head to tamp down a mixture of gunpowder and sand when the volatile mixture exploded. I was grateful that he did not also ask why I wasn't dead. How would I know? Doctors who had examined me speculated that somehow the spike had missed all of the important parts of my brain. When I was young my mother had always suggested that I didn't use any of it; maybe that was the case.

"What about you?" I asked. The shirt he was wearing covered the terrible scars.

He nodded grimly, allowing that he owed me his tale. "My wounds were not inflicted by accident. The brothers of my ex-wife inflicted them, rest their souls. They ambushed me in my barn with meat cleavers and chains, then set fire to the barn and left me for dead."

I winced. "Why would they do that?" I asked.

Graves looked off into the woods. "I was unfaithful to their sister, in a manner of speaking," he muttered.

As I puzzled over this reply, Darby retrieved the bottle and offered seconds. I held out my cup until he poured me a liberal glass. I rarely had more than one alcoholic drink at a time, but I found I was enjoying myself. I felt a kinship with this man

Graves that I had felt with no one since the accident. I found his gravelly baritone comforting, enjoyed the rise and fall of his heavy brow as we conversed.

Graves landed a blow to my chest, knocking me backward half a step. He followed with a well-telegraphed roundhouse punch at my head. I blocked it (my first instinct was to duck, but thankfully I suppressed it), then countered with a punch to his ribs. It was like punching a side of beef.

My heart was pounding, the hoots and howls of the crowd magnifying my fear and excitement. Graves lunged at me like a bull, arms raised and head down; I side-stepped and swiped at him with the back of my fist, catching his shoulder. He screamed with rage; I answered with my best howl as we closed again, circling.

He surged forward, landing punches to my arms, chest, and shoulders that sent me backpedalling. While my balance was off he caught me under the arms, lifted me, and slammed me to the ground. We had practiced this, ensuring I would land on my side or my ass. Still, it was terrifying; I had to make sure my head was positioned so there was no chance the bottom of the spike would impact the ground. Before I could regain my feet, Graves dove at me, allowing enough time for me to scurry out from under him. I jumped to my feet and kicked him in the thigh. The crowd roared approval as Graves lumbered to his feet.

I was gasping, unused to physical exertion, yet invigorated by the sweat and dust and strain. Graves growled, swiped at the air between us, then broke into a grin. I could see it was unintentional—the humorlessness of our situation had suddenly struck him. He guffawed, his shoulders bouncing as I struggled to suppress a smile of my own. The crowd didn't seem to notice, but I was concerned we might give ourselves away, so I ran at Graves, windmilling my arms. He lifted me off my feet and slammed me to the ground again. As soon as I landed I scrambled between his legs and tangled myself in them, toppling the big man face-down. As we'd planned, I scrambled on top of him and pressed his arm up behind his back.

Graves' cries of pain were convincing as I made a show of yanking his arm up.

"Do you concede?" I shouted.

Graves was squirming beneath me, shouting in pain and outrage, until finally admitting that the pain was too much.

Earlier he had insisted the crowd would prefer to see David defeat Goliath, and from their reaction, he was correct.

As Graves regained his feet I extended my hand. He snarled and shoved me. We exchanged new punches, thumping each other with what looked to be all of our might.

Shouts rang out that the fight was over; a dozen men pulled us apart, their blood likely pumping with courage from the spectacle we'd put on. Graves and I allowed ourselves to be driven to different corners of the yard as cheers rose up. I nodded thanks, embarrassed by the earnestness of the crowd's congratulations, and hurried away as soon as I could.

As I left I noticed our managers huddled, their heads together like close confidants. I smiled, pleased by the sight. It did not take much imagination to guess that they were negotiating a continued alliance.

We passed a farmer standing at the side of the road, his arms wrapped around the neck of a mule, the mule struggling to free itself. When the farmer spotted us reclining atop the moving wagon, he froze. The mule pulled free and the farmer plopped to the muddy ground, staring dumbfounded at our retreating figures. Graves and I roared with laughter, pointing at the poor astonished farmer, waving at him like young hoodlums.

It had been Graves' idea to climb onto the roof and enjoy the crisp air and sun-

shine. The vibration was exquisite, like a brisk massage. Normally I didn't like to be seen in public because of the stares and shrieks that resulted, but I found it far easier to be one of two passing spectacles, rather than the sole attraction. I sighed contentedly, watched a green, cow-dotted field drift by.

"I have to work on my falls." Graves was examining a bruise on his elbow. "I instinctively brace myself with my elbows."

"I do as well," I said. Our fight the previous night (our fourth) had electrified the crowd. We were getting more confident in our movements, more comfortable working together. By the time we reached Chicago we would put on quite a show.

I chided myself—why should I feel proud of my growing ability to deceive? "Do you think it's wrong, what we do? Taking people's money on a false premise?" I asked Graves.

Graves laughed, clapped my knee and shook it, as if trying to shake sense into me. "We're not fooling them. They know neither of us is the Frankenstein monster. They only want to be entertained, to be astounded." He paused to wave at a trio of children pointing at us from a schoolyard. "What we give them is like a magician's sleight of hand—they know we're frauds, but want to be impressed by the skill with which we fool them."

I sighed. "I suppose you're right. Still, it haunts me to make a living this way. It's the easiest work I've ever done, yet also the most difficult."

Graves raised an eyebrow. "Really now? More difficult than setting explosives for the railroad?"

"Well, maybe not," I allowed.

Graves rubbed at his good eye with the corner of his shirtsleeve. The dust kicked up by the wagon was an annoyance. "You said the accident didn't knock you out. Did you realize what had happened right away?"

"No." Images of the accident flooded my thoughts. Years had gone by, yet it was always as if it happened last week. "After the explosion I was counting my blessings that I hadn't been hurt too badly. I didn't occur to me to wonder where the spike had gone. Then I saw how the other workers were looking at me, and I knew something was terribly wrong."

"Hm," Graves grunted.

The wagon eased out of the road and slowed to a stop. Graves and I climbed down, I with a heavy heart, because I knew we were stopping so the two wagons could split. Graves and Yorkie would hold back while Darby and I rode into Chicago. For our ruse to work, we couldn't be seen entering together.

Graves held out his hand. "See you in a few days, Phineas. I can't remember when I've had a more enjoyable afternoon."

I shook, feeling a rush of pleasure from the compliment. I was glad Graves had enjoyed my company—I was hoping we would continue our act together after our performance at the World's Fair, but there had been no discussions of it yet.

As we rumbled along the streets of Chicago, I stayed out of sight. I did not like cities; I found city people harder than country people, more apt to hurl insults at a passing stranger sporting a disfigurement.

"Look to your right," Darby called into the wagon. "You can see the fair."

I crossed the tiny room and looked out the other window. The sight left me breathless. Massive marble halls, amphitheaters, fountains roaring toward the sky, statues, a Viking ship on a blue channel. Further down, the Wheel, rotating slowly, its apex hundreds of feet in the air. Finely dressed ladies and gentlemen strolled the promenade, dwarfed by the attractions. I could hardly believe my eyes; this was not a fair-ground, it was a shining city dropped here from the future.

We continued past the main fairgrounds to the carnival midway, where clowns and barkers drew rubes to their shows and games of chance. This was where we belonged, where our contribution to the fair was fit to reside. I didn't mind, though; to be part of this, even the darker, grittier part, filled me near to tears.

Our wagon rocked and bounced as Darby pulled down a lane into the dusty lot where workers on the midway slept. A grizzled man in overalls sitting by a smoky pot stood as we lumbered past in search of a spot among the maze of makeshift camps. He pointed at our wagon and shouted something I couldn't make out.

There was precious little space, and we had to squeeze between two other wagons, leaving hardly room to open our door. Then there was nothing to do but wait for Graves and Yorkie. I drew a deck of cards from the desk and reclined on the tiny bed.

"You?" Graves boomed, eyeing me up and down for the gathering crowd. "You're the one claiming to be me? Why, you're nothing but a baby seal someone's harpooned." At each performance Graves came up with new and more creative insults to hurl at me.

"You two don't look nothing like the other one," a man with a thick mustache shouted from the crowd, sounding dubious.

"What?" Darby asked.

"The other one's all twisted up. Its parts is all mismatched. They don't look nothing like it."

"What other one?" Darby looked dumbfounded. I imagine I did as well. The other one? Surely there wasn't a *third* person masquerading as the monster.

"Haven't you seen it?" a boy no older than twelve or thirteen asked, his eyes round. "It's just horrible. I had bad dreams last night."

Darby could not get a clear explanation of who this third monster was, only that it was housed in the Hall of Electricity. The wind taken out of our act, Graves and I hurled a few final halfhearted insults and retreated to our respective wagons.

Darby and I ate cold bacon and potatoes, and wondered at the possibility of a third Frankenstein act.

There was a rap at the door. Darby rose and pulled back the curtain. "Blast it all!" He shoved the curtain back into place. "It's that loon from Galesburg. The one who paid to speak to you."

I shrugged. "Maybe he wants to give away a few more dollars. I don't mind."

"I suppose." Darby ran nervous fingers through his grey hair, then went to the door, pasting on his public smile just as the door swung open. "Hello, hello, good sir! So very good to see you again."

"And you," the man said. Wilson, I recalled his name was. "I was hoping I might see you here at the fair!" His voice hitched with excitement. "I have something to show you." He gestured toward me. "Both of you."

He would not tell us what, only beseeched us to follow, pulling us along like an impatient child.

The sky in the direction of the Fair was glowing. At first I thought it must be a fire, but it was not a red glow, but a yellow-white. We climbed great stone steps and suddenly the grounds were before us, and they were blazing with the light of a thousand lamps. No—ten thousand, a hundred thousand.

"It is a sight, isn't it?" Wilson said, noting my astonishment. "It's all powered by electricity, from Nikola Tesla's Niagara power station. I know Tesla."

I did not know who Tesla was, but Wilson seemed proud to know him, and if he had achieved the miracle before us perhaps pride was justified.

"Tesla found me space in the Hall of Electricity," Wilson said, pointing at a partic-

ularly impressive building fronted with rows of towering columns. "I didn't use electricity, but it seemed an appropriate venue."

I could barely hear him over the crashing of water in a magnificent fountain that was set in the center. Eight riders on rearing horses surrounded a man (or perhaps a Greek god) standing on the deck of a ship, his arm raised triumphantly.

Wilson led us into the Hall of Electricity, which was so brightly lit inside that I threw my arm across my eyes to protect them, and could not help but think of Frankenstein's monster cowering from the villagers' torches. After a moment our eyes adjusted. It was magnificent—engines sat at every corner, wires raced above us from one pole to the next, connecting to buildings housed inside one enormous room. Everything seemed lit except the girdered ceiling towering high overhead.

"This way, follow me." Wilson rushed us through, barely glancing at the hall's interior. He led us into a wide hall, then turned onto a narrower hall and led us to a massive door at the end. He fished a key out of his trouser pocket.

There was a terrible sound coming from the room—a pitiful keening that made me want to cover my ears. Wilson threw open the door and led us in. The room was empty except for a raised bed boxed in by wooden pegs. On the mattress lay the thing making that sound, a thing so twisted and disfigured that I could not stand the sight of it.

"It is not nearly as perfect as you," Wilson said to me. "I hope we will talk more so I can understand how Doctor Frankenstein formed you so perfectly. The attachment points, especially, were a challenge."

The thing was crying. Quivers ran up and down its milky-pale skin.

"What happened to me?" The movement of its jaw was stiff, and its mouth opened at an impossible angle. It tried to shift itself, cried out in agony. "I hurt so much. I hurt."

And no wonder. It did not seem to have bones in all of the places it should. There was no way it could possibly sit up, let alone stand or walk.

"Good lord," Darby whispered.

"He frets much of the time, I'm afraid. And there is something wrong with his mind—he cannot hold memory for long. Every few minutes he must learn everything anew." Wilson patted the thing as if it were a loyal pet. "But he is alive, and that is a start."

There were stitches running all over it, black dashes that framed the long, raised, semi-healed places where things had been attached to one another.

"Where am I? There must have been an accident. Margaret?"

Wilson reached up and put a hand on my shoulder. He was beaming like a proud father. "I could not have accomplished this without your help."

I recoiled, knocking his hand off of me. "Without my . . . ?" I sputtered, lost for words. Could this thing really be what Wilson claimed? It was inconceivable, yet what else could it possibly be? "I was lying," I shouted into his face. "I made it up."

Wilson frowned, as if he were having difficulty understanding my words.

"This is all an act, you idiot! I'm not Frankenstein's monster, I'm a man with a God damned spike through his head. Frankenstein is fiction." Only now it was not, and I was partly responsible.

While Wilson mulled this over, the thing on the mattress cried softly. "Please. Please help me," it whispered.

Wilson inhaled sharply, turned to me. His eyes seemed to have doubled in size. "Then . . . I'm the first!"

I stormed from the room. Darby called after me and I broke into a run, fleeing the building and the twisted monstrosity it housed.

Outside, the buildings now seemed menacing. They loomed rather than towered, their glowing presence shouting "We are the future. It will be cold and wondrous. The

dead will walk." I put my head down and ran, not sure which direction led to the warmth and chaos of the midway.

I stumbled onto the lot and trotted through, seeking Graves' wagon. I cried out when I spotted it on the edge of the field, beside a ditch.

Panting with exertion, I pounded on the door. Graves opened it, registered my expression and let me in.

"What is it?" he asked, his face full of concern.

"There is a real Frankenstein monster here—a living creature made from dead body parts, and I helped bring it about."

Graves only nodded, waiting for me to explain. I told him of Wilson's visit a few months back, and described the miserable thing he had birthed.

"You're certain it's not some clever hoax?" Graves asked when I had finished.

"I assure you, this one is no hoax."

Graves put his face in his hands and sighed. "We both bear responsibility. I have been parading around the countryside, convincing people that such a thing is possible. Of course people would try to make their own monster. Of course."

The door flew open. "Have you located the other monster act?" Yorkie asked. "We can stage three fights if his manager's agreeable."

"It is not an act," I said. "There is a monster here."

Yorkie barked laughter. "A monster act falling for another monster act. That spike must have done more damage than you let on."

"I've seen it. I assure you, it is not an act."

Yorkie smirked and shook his head. "If you insist. In any case, it complicates matters."

He was still thinking about business. Business was the furthest thing from my mind, which was swimming in a stew of agony. Silently, I gestured to Graves that we should leave. He nodded and followed.

"Hey," Yorkie called after us, "you can't show yourselves together. It'll ruin our act."

"To hell with our act," I shouted back at him.

"I want to see it," Graves said as soon as we were outside.

I nodded. "I'll show you. I wish I never had to lay eyes on it again, but I'll show you."

We skirted the edge of the lot, staying in the shadows of trees and brush, passing only one man relieving himself after too much drink. He stared at us in open distress, two monsters lurking, loose from their cages.

The main fairgrounds were by now closed for the night, so we climbed the fence in a dark spot. We crossed a bridge, passing a grand sloop moored in the canal. Graves gasped as the bulk of the fairgrounds came into view.

"Wait until you see the Hall of Electricity," I said.

The great hall had been left unlocked, but not the room that housed Wilson's monster. We could hear the cries of the monster within. Graves turned sideways and slammed the door with his shoulder; the door flew open in comically easy fashion, bouncing off the wall and swinging back to strike Graves. He paused to examine the splintered edge, shaking his head. "It looks like solid oak, but it's nothing but cheap, hollow pine. I'll bet this whole building is like that—made to look grand, but cheap and hollow under the surface."

Before I could answer, Graves was distracted by the monster's awful sobs. He followed the sounds and stood over the thing on the cushion.

"Dear God." Graves clutched two wooden pegs to steady himself. He took a few deep breaths.

"I am a sight, aren't I?" the thing said. Its cheek, pressed to the cushion, was surrounded by a wet stain of tears. "Was it a carriage accident? Are you doctors?"

"Yes," Graves said. "We're doctors."

I nodded agreement, although we were hardly dressed the part, and I had a tamp-

ing bar lodged in my head and Graves a scar splitting his face down the middle. Beyond the creature's dais a few wooden dowels were leaned against the wall, leftovers from the makeshift prison that surrounded the creature. I retrieved one and crept up to stand behind the creature.

Graves' eyes filled with tears. He nodded. I raised the dowel.

"Do I have a wife?" the creature said.

"You have a wife, and she loves you very much," Graves said. A tear rolled down his cheek. He squeezed his eyes shut.

I wanted to close my eyes as well. I raised and lowered the dowel twice, three times before letting it drop to my side. "I can't do it," I mouthed.

Graves nodded. He turned to the creature and smiled kindly. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to move you, sir. It will be painful, but I—I have to take you where I can treat your injuries."

The creature's expression made it clear that he did not relish the idea of being lifted. "If you must, you must."

Graves leaned over the dowels and lifted him out. The creature screamed. I could not imagine the agony that could cause such a sound to form in a living throat. Arms outstretched to minimize the jarring the creature must endure, Graves carried him, walking swiftly but gingerly. I hurried after.

"Where are we going?" I hissed.

Graves turned his head to answer. "I don't know."

We rushed through the big front doors, glancing left and right. Where could we take him that would be better than where he had been? The problem was not that he was in the Hall of Electricity, the problem was what he was.

There was only one solution. If only I had mustered the courage to bring the dowel down on his poor misshapen head.

The roar of the fountain was no match for the creature's screams—they lit the air, echoing off the buildings.

I paused, staring at the fountain.

"This way." I waded into the fountain; the water was thigh-deep and tepid. Graves followed without a word.

"What is this place? Who are you?" the creature said. Its hands, which were clutching Graves's arms, were completely different sizes; one appeared to be a woman's.

"We are your doctors—you've been in a terrible accident," I replied. "These are healing waters." I held out my hands. Graves gently laid the thing in my arms and helped me lower it until it lay floating, its face just above the water. "I'm going to heal you now."

I pushed its head under the water. Strands of black hair drifted up and wrapped around my fingers.

Graves knelt and pressed the creature's chest, submerging it completely. He sobbed, turned his head to one side as bubbles roiled up to the surface. The thing thrashed its arms and legs weakly.

"Just another moment, just a moment," I cooed. "It will be over in a moment." My chest heaved and I let out a groan, or perhaps it was a laugh, and then I burst into tears.

"Shh. It's almost done," Graves said.

But it was not. It took an eternity for the thing to be still. I don't know if it was more resistant to death because it came from death, or if time had slowed nearly to a stop inside my own head.

When the thing finally ceased thrashing and was still, I let go, then so did Graves. It floated up languidly until its face broke the surface, bobbing gently on tiny windswept waves.

"I'm not a monster. I don't want to play one any longer," Graves said, grimacing down at the half-submerged body, aglow from the electric light that filled the air.

"I feel like a monster," I said. My legs were shaking so badly I wasn't sure I could make it back to the wagon.

"I, too," Graves said.

"What are you doing in there?" Wilson stood at the edge of the fountain, frowning.

His gaze dropped to the water, to the body. He cried out, leapt into the fountain, thrashed toward us. "What have you done?"

We ran. Wilson shouted at us to stop. I heard sharp footsteps on the pavement behind us, and cries for help, cries that there had been a murder. We raced over the footbridge, clambered over the fence and into the midway, weaving among shuttered stalls, Graves in the lead and me on his heels.

Other voices rose up behind us as Wilson mustered assistance. Shouts of "Monsters" and "Murder" rang out.

"This way," Graves called, hopping off a raised railway platform and across two sets of tracks. A passenger train sat quiet and dark on the furthest track; Graves ducked under one of the cars and I followed.

A terrific jolt snapped my neck back; my vision was laced with electric pinwheels as my feet flew out and I slammed to the gravel. I lay semi-conscious; there was a hard ringing in my ears, and an agony behind my eyes like none I had ever felt or imagined. It felt as if my skull had been split with an axe.

The underside of the car appeared above me; Graves was dragging me under the car. A moment later his dark silhouette leaned over me; he slid a hand beneath my head and cradled it.

"Can you speak?" he whispered.

"I forgot about the spike." Pain lanced through my head and neck.

"Shh, shh." Graves touched my forehead, then his hand drifted up toward the spike. "Oh, lord." His tone jarred me to full consciousness.

"What?"

"The spike is loose. It's very loose." He shifted position, bent to peer at the top of my head in the dim light. "Does this hurt?"

I felt the bottom of the spike move side to side, brushing my chest. My head hurt terribly, and there was a wetness on my neck that I assumed was blood, but the movement of the spike didn't exacerbate it noticeably. "No." Some of the shouts had grown closer; I hoped we were hidden well enough to evade the men hunting for us.

"I don't know what to do," Graves said. "Should I pull it out?"

"No!" A thrill of terror washed over me. The doctors said removing the spike would likely kill me, that the spike might be holding my brains in place.

"I think it will fall out in any case when you sit up." He moved it again; the bottom of the spike moved in a wider arc than before. "It's very loose. Wouldn't it be better to slide it out carefully?"

I considered telling him to wrap his shirt around my head to secure it in place, but what good was that if it was loose to the point of falling out? And it would be wonderful to be free of it once and for all. Perhaps it was worth the risk of my brains spilling out onto the track, to be rid of it.

"Quiet," Graves warned. I heard footsteps and low voices; the orange glow of torch-light grew bright and then waned. Graves let out his breath. "We must get away from here."

"Pull it out," I said, my heart pounding.

Graves put a hand on my shoulder. "Are you sure?"

I grasped his wrist. "If it kills me, don't linger, my friend. Get somewhere safe."

I couldn't see his eye, but somehow I knew it had filled with tears. "After I remove

this oversized three-penny nail, you'll have to find a new line of work for certain." With that he grasped the hilt of the spike beneath my neck and gently drew it down.

The space between his fist on the spike and my chin increased in tiny, jerking increments. "It's coming," he said. I could not believe my eyes. Two inches of spike that had been above my head were now below it. Then three, four, six.

The spike stalled.

Graves grunted softly, straining. "It's stuck."

It was almost out. I wasn't sure, but I imagined the tip of it was no longer above my head but inside it. My stomach lurched at the thought. "Yank the damned thing out," I hissed. Suddenly it felt like a living thing, a giant steel cockroach inside me.

Graves shifted position. He cradled my head between his thigh and forearm, then grasped the spike below my chin. I squeezed my eyes shut, bracing for the moment.

I heard Graves grunt; my chin whiplashed toward my chest and back up. Fresh pinwheels erupted behind my eyes. Far away someone screamed.

It was I who had screamed, I realized as I drifted away from my body, from Graves and the train and all of my concerns.

I was vaguely aware of being lifted, but could not lift my head to look around.

"Here! They're here!" someone shouted. Not someone, I knew who he was, but I could not think of his name. "What have you done? You—"

Wilson. His name was Wilson.

"I thought the two of you were in cahoots, but that's not it, is it?" Wilson said to Graves. "You wanted to be the only monster, eh? So you killed them both." A roaring of heat and searing light passed by my face. "Don't move or I'll burn you alive!" Then he shouted again, "Here! I need help!"

"Get out of my way," Graves said.

"You were going to drown him in the fountain, too, weren't you?" Wilson said. "Until I happened along."

There was a patterning on the ground. Blood—my blood, leaking from the now-open wound in the top of my head. The ground rose up, or rather, I dropped down as Graves squatted to retrieve something and then stood again to his full height. Shouts of discovery rose up close by.

"Move aside or I'll kill you as well," Graves threatened. He was clutching the spike. The center portion of it was caked with pieces from inside my head, and discolored from years hidden from the sun.

Wilson waved his torch again. "Stay where you are, monster." Did he still believe Graves was truly a monster, or did he mean it in the more pedestrian sense?

Graves lunged and hit Wilson in the head with the spike. Wilson crumpled to the gravel, his torch falling nearby, spitting sparks. An instant later I was bobbing wildly, clutched in Graves' arms as he fled.

Blurred images passed by, canted at an angle that was nearly upside-down. Graves said something, but I couldn't make out what, and didn't have the strength to ask him to repeat it. His footsteps took on a hollower sound and we rose up, over a wooden bridge and back down the other side. We flew through the lot, past cooking fires that left orange afterimages dancing in my vision, then up a few steps and through a doorway.

"My God." It was Darby. He helped lower me to a soft bunk; a pillow was set under my throbbing head, the wounds wrapped in a towel.

"What happened?" Darby asked.

"There's no time," Graves answered. "We must flee."

Darby knelt beside me. "I'll get you to a doctor, quick as I can."

Yorkie burst into the wagon. His eyes grew wide when he saw me. "What happened? He's alive? Will he be all right?"

"There's no saying," Graves said, drawing back the curtain slightly and peering out the window. "Let's get away from here and find a doctor."

"I'm out of the Frankenstein business," I said to Darby, my voice a dry whisper. "I'm through. No more."

Darby chuckled sadly, patted my shoulder. "Whether you want out or not, you're not much of a monster without that spike."

Graves turned to Yorkie. "I'm out as well."

Yorkie shook his head, denying the proclamation. "Tell me what happened."

Graves sketched the events as Darby hitched the horses.

Moments later Darby poked his head inside to warn us that we would be moving shortly.

"I don't see why you're quitting," Yorkie said to Graves. "None of this is your doing."

Graves stared flatly, offering no reply.

"Fine then, leave me with no meal ticket." Yorkie drummed his fingers on his chin, thinking. "There are always other attractions."

The wheels groaned to a start. Yorkie shouted to Darby to stop. "I'm not losing my wagon." Without another word, he hopped out the door.

Graves sat beside me. He examined my eyes, one after another, then smiled and nodded his satisfaction as the horses built up speed.

"Is Wilson dead?" I asked.

"I don't know. He may be." He looked away, closed his eyes. "He left me no choice."

"I hope he's dead," I said. "Better he die, and take his knowledge with him."

Darby wound up the switchback road that had brought us to the lot, then along the smoother road along the city's edge. Graves watched through the window as we rattled and bounced, speeding along. Each stone and rut caused my head to split again, but I knew Darby couldn't slow.

"We're passing the main grounds," Graves said. "I'm sorry I didn't get to see more of it."

"Mmm," I agreed. It hurt to speak.

Graves yanked the curtain wide. "Oh, you stinking bastard!" He pressed his nose to the window, peering intently.

"What?" I asked. "What is it?"

Graves pounded the carriage wall. "That bastard Yorkie. He's pulling the monster out of the fountain."

It took me a moment to grasp. "Your replacement?"

"He'll have it pickled and show it in a tank."

I groaned. Graves cursed under his breath as we rolled on past the great fair.

"The Frankenstein monster lives on," I suggested.

Graves pounded the wall a second time. Clearly he didn't realize how much it hurt my head when he did that. "Yes, it does. But if I ever find Yorkie I'll pull his monster apart, as it belongs."

As it belongs, yes. "Or better yet, we bury the poor thing where no one can ever find it."

"Yes," Graves said, letting the curtain drop. "Better yet." O

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Kate Wilhelm is the author of more than forty novels and collections of short stories and novellas including *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*, *The Infinity Box*, *The Clewiston Test*, and *Children of the Wind*. She has won the Hugo, the Nebula, and the Locus awards, among others. For twenty-seven years, she and her late husband, Damon Knight, taught at the Clarion Writers' Workshop in Fantasy and Science Fiction, an intensive writing program for which they received an honorary degree from Michigan State University in recognition of their years as instructors. Kate's book *Storyteller* covers writing lessons from the workshop. She has also written a series of novels featuring defense attorney Barbara Holloway, the latest of which, *Heaven Is High*, will be published by St. Martin's Press early next year. Her newest story takes a chilling look at the cost of . . .

CHANGING THE WORLD

Kate Wilhelm

MELVIN H. TOOMY. He typed in the words, sat back and studied them, then deleted them. Since it was his confession, he didn't need to add his name up front like that. He started over.

IT BEGAN THE DAY I OVERHEARD MY WIFE AND DAUGHTER TALKING ABOUT ME.

He remembered the conversation all too clearly. Penny and her husband Ryan were visiting for the weekend. They had been married for one year, were still in the honeymoon phase, and Penny had little sympathy for anything or anyone who disturbed the roseate glow that enveloped her. Ruth was speaking when he happened to draw near the open kitchen window.

"He's just so aimless these days. It worries me."

"Mother, he's driving you crazy is what he's doing. Why doesn't he go play golf or something?"

"He sold the clubs. He said thank God he'd never have to spend another hour with another idiot chasing a little white ball around in the blazing sunshine."

"Oh, great. He won't go fishing or hunting, or take up glass blowing or something, or volunteer for anything, so he's bored. It's not your problem, Mother. It's his."

"It must be terribly hard for him. You know, the big office, secretary, expense account lunches, and now all of it's gone. Stock options worthless, 401(k) practically worthless. You start out thinking you'll do great things, change the world or something, and sud-

denly you're sixty years old, it's all gone, and you wonder what happened. He's put out feelers, but no one will hire a sixty-year-old man. . . ." The words trailed off.

He grimaced as the words played in his head. He couldn't stand having his wife pity him or his beautiful daughter dismiss him that way. And God knew he never had thought of changing the world or anything else. He closed his eyes, remembering the weekend from the past April and how it had changed his life.

That night at dinner Ruth talked about one of her staff at the high school. "She took the laptop home with her, left it in her car while she ducked into the store for milk, and it was stolen. Students' personal information, personnel information. We have backups, of course, but still, someone has that information now."

"Happens all the time," Ryan said. "Everyone should have an external hard drive and carry it if they have to take work home."

"How does that work?" Ruth asked. She was principal of the high school and loss of the files had been a worry all week.

Ryan explained external hard drives, and the following day he and Mel had gone out to buy one. He installed it on the home computer that Mel rarely touched, but that Ruth often used.

"See," he said, when they were done transferring files and programs. "Take it out, and there's the whole computer in a gadget hardly bigger than a deck of cards. Keep it in your purse or your pocket, plug it in a home computer and you're all set."

"If confidential information is on it, does that mean no one can find it on the main computer, or even know it's been there?" Mel asked, thinking of the many times he had read that investigators had seized someone's computer and found damning information. They had seized computers at his company. His late company, he corrected. It had gone bankrupt two months earlier.

Ryan shook his head. "Not just like that. The computer has a record of the external drive, so searchers would know about it. And the original data is still recoverable, of course."

Mel would have asked more questions, but Ruth said lunch was ready. As they ate, she asked how the visit with Ryan's parents had gone.

Penny and Ryan exchanged glances and she ducked her head, played with an olive on her plate and remained silent. Mel watched her with a pang, recalling how she used to play with olives or peas, rolling them around, chasing them, and both he and Ruth had pretended not to notice.

"It was fine," Ryan said without inflection. "We showed them around the city, they did some sightseeing on their own, then back to JFK and Orlando. I doubt they'll ever visit New York City again. They don't like it."

"They want us to have children," Penny said in a strained voice. "We said we planned to, just not yet."

Ruth's lips tightened, but she did not comment, which Mel thought was commendable. Neither of them liked Ryan's parents. Too reactionary, too authoritarian, too sanctimonious, they had agreed, adding more and more pejoratives to follow the too until they were both laughing.

"I don't think any allegation voiced yet has been too screwy for them to swallow," Ryan said in the same flat tone he had used before. "I can't imagine how crazy it would have to be before they would draw the line."

"Some of the teachers are caught up in a kind of madness," Ruth said in a tight voice. "They listen to the same talk radio, that Bob Fellowes, or television programs all parrotting the same message, and just accept whatever is said." She shook her head and changed the subject.

Those three little scenes, Mel thought, did it. Any one of them alone would have been forgettable, but the three coalesced, merged, and his world changed.

The alarm he had set went off. Ruth would be home in an hour and he planned to have things started for dinner. His confession would have to wait. He exited his word processor, closed the program, and shut down the external hard drive which he had named X. He unplugged the X drive, slipped it in his pocket, and plugged in one hardly bigger than a cigar, one he thought of as X2, but was also named X. It held their passwords, email addresses, a few other things, enough to justify its existence. The hard drive Ryan had plugged in was named H, and it backed up the entire computer.

So now he had three external hard drives, Mel reflected, and derisively added, thus I embrace the digital age, better late than never.

He had been the general manager of publications, the official newsletters, shareholder reports, and such that were routinely published. With a secretary and several staff members there had been no need for him to learn to use a computer at work, and he had not even attempted to explore it. In the last six months, however, he had come a long way, he thought with satisfaction. He had discovered search engines, blogs, Google, Wikipedia . . . Very early on, he had decided he needed to hide what he was finding on the Internet and he had bought X, the big second hard drive, to save Ruth's peace of mind.

After that April visit by Penny and Ryan, he had begun listening to Bob Fellowes, and he had started watching television in a way neither he nor Ruth had ever done in the past. He had been curious about what messages were turning teachers into people who made Ruth roll her eyes and change the subject, what kind of messages made Ryan imply that his own parents were ripe for crazy talk.

That constant drumbeat of conspiracy theories, hate talk, fear-mongering had been too much for Ruth to bear, and if he had been driving her to distraction by inactivity, his new activity had made her doubt his sanity. He was finding more and more of the same kind of madness on the Internet, but his computer usage was all stored on his personal external drive he had named X, and their household remained peaceful. After a month he stopped listening to Fellowes, and he stopped watching the television shows she despised. He had seen and heard enough, and now he simply tuned in occasionally to see if they were still doing it. They were, louder all the time.

In the kitchen he whistled softly as he put potatoes on to start cooking. Although his dinners were simple comfort food that he remembered from his childhood, Ruth was appreciative and, to the surprise of both of them, something had been rekindled that had been dormant. Her eyes sparkled, and to his eyes she looked younger and prettier than she had just a few months earlier.

Not long after the visit by Penny and Ryan, he had begun to mull over the question Ryan had raised: what allegation would be crazy enough to make his parents draw the line? At first Mel doubted there could be such an allegation, since the ones being voiced appeared to be more than enough to have that effect already.

A thunderstorm in July supplied an answer to the question. Both he and Ruth came awake when thunder shook the house, followed almost instantly by lightning. He patted Ruth's shoulder and got up. "I'll see to the windows. Go back to sleep." She murmured something, pulled her pillow over her head, and remained in bed.

Standing at a window watching lightning flare repeatedly, it came to him. Lights in the sky. UFOs. But it had to be different from the many UFO sightings and visitations reported and debunked over decades. He began to smile, then chuckled, and by the time the storm blew over, he had decided to do a little research and then launch his own conspiracy theory and put the idiots to the test.

First, he needed some cover, a reason for his newfound cheerfulness. The house had a partitioned-off section of the basement where a previous owner had set up a woodworking shop that would serve his purpose. He bought a few tools, wood, several books with plans for home projects, shellac, varnish, paints, thinners, and a box of surgical gloves.

Everything he purchased during that period was simply to account for the gloves. Ruth never questioned any of it, and even expressed her satisfaction to Penny that finally he had latched onto a hobby.

He invented a whistleblower from a never-to-be-named top-secret government agency, and named him Cyrus Cornwall. By September Cyrus was ready to write his first letters, to be accompanied by several highly redacted, top-secret government memos and other documents.

I AM EMPLOYED IN A UNIT OF [REDACTED]. OUR UNIT IS COMPOSED OF THREE TIERS OF INVESTIGATORS: TIER 1 RECEIVES A COPY OF EVERY SIGHTING OF UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECTS (UFOs) REPORTED IN THE UNITED STATES. MOST OF THESE SIGHTINGS ARE READILY DISMISSED AS NATURAL PHENOMENA: COMMERCIAL AND PRIVATE AIRCRAFT, ARMED FORCES CRAFT, PLANETS, SWAMP GAS, REFLECTIONS OF LIGHTS ON CLOUDS, AND SO ON. A NUMBER OF THEM ARE SENT TO TIER 2 FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION BY OPERATIVES WHO GO INTO THE FIELD TO QUESTION OBSERVERS, EXAMINE ALLEGED LANDING SITES, AND OTHERWISE SEEK TO PROVE OR DISPROVE THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE SIGHTING. AMONG THE REPORTS ESCALATED TO TIER 2 ARE SOME THAT ARE SEALED AND IMMEDIATELY ESCALATED TO TIER 3.

FOR A NUMBER OF YEARS I WAS ASSIGNED TO TIER 2, BUT IN RECENT YEARS I HAVE WORKED IN TIER 3. THE SEALED REPORTS OUR GROUP RECEIVES ARE EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS OF UFOs LANDING, AND OCCUPANTS EMERGING. IN EACH AND EVERY ACCOUNT IN THIS GROUP THE SPACE TRAVELERS ARE DESCRIBED AS "LOOKING JUST LIKE US, LIKE NORMAL PEOPLE." SEE ADDENDA 1-5.

He saved the work, pocketed his X drive, and went to the workroom to spend a little time on the birdhouse he was making. He had found to his surprise that he enjoyed doing it and that he even recalled some of what he had learned in his ninth grade shop class. The shop proved to be a good place to think of his next move. Codes, he thought, sanding a piece of cedar. He would code each letter so that he would know who to follow up with if any of his recipients responded. A classified ad in the *New York Times* would do. A response on a Sunday in the *Times* would bring the lucky one more material.

He invented observers for the landings he had chosen from the vast number of references he had found on the Internet under UFOs. His observers were from 1946, 1953, 1961, 1988, 2000 in widely separated areas of the United States. Two college boys camping, a housewife in her back yard, a doctor, three hunters, a retired pilot; good sober, law abiding citizens with no agenda of their own. He had thought of trying to duplicate newspaper accounts of their reports, gave it up, and decided to simply summarize the reports and the follow-up accounts of the deaths and or disappearances of each and every one of them within days of going public with what they had seen.

Writing as Cyrus Cornwall, he summarized the sightings.

DR. JEROME HENDERSON, VACATIONING ON THE SHORE OF LAKE ONTARIO WITH HIS FAMILY, STEPPED OUTSIDE LATE AT NIGHT AND SAW A UFO LAND A SHORT DISTANCE FROM HIS CABIN. A BRIGHT MOONLIT NIGHT PERMITTED HIM TO SEE CLEARLY WHEN A HATCH OPENED AND PEOPLE APPEARED, DESCENDED, AND WALKED TO A WAITING BUS THAT LOOKED LIKE A TOUR BUS. HE ESTIMATED THAT FORTY TO FIFTY PEOPLE LEFT THE SPACE CRAFT. HE STATED, "THEY WERE JUST ORDINARY PEOPLE, A MIXTURE OF TYPES ONE MIGHT SEE ON ANY STREET IN ANY CITY, AND PROBABLY ALL WERE UNDER FORTY YEARS OLD. THE BUS DEPARTED WHEN THEY WERE LOADED, AND THE SPACE CRAFT ROSE SILENTLY, MADE A SHARP TURN, AND VANISHED." THREE DAYS LATER, ONE DAY AFTER DR. HENDERSON MADE HIS REPORT, HE WAS KILLED IN A ONE-CAR TRAFFIC ACCIDENT.

The summaries were similar in most respects; sometimes a bus was reported, or several large vans, once a closed truck. All the observers died or disappeared within a day or two of reporting the landing. Mel knew his accounts were too amateurish,

too non-specific to be taken seriously. But wasn't that the point? he argued with himself. Crackpot stuff, crazy talk, unverified and unverifiable was exactly his point.

Many of the memos he worked on were from Major [REDACTED] to Colonel [REDACTED], and in one instance to General [REDACTED].

One was so heavily redacted that the only legible words left in the memo were urgent, immediate action, highest classified priority, seizing such visitors alive, deniability, Project Skylight, FOIA.

He bought a ream of paper and envelopes in Middletown where he was unknown, thirty miles from Port Jervis, where he and Ruth had bought their house years before and he was well known. When he printed out his material, he made eight copies, and he wore surgical gloves. He used a moist sponge to seal the envelopes; the stamps were self-sealing. He was careful not to leave a fingerprint on anything, not to leave any DNA on anything.

In mid September he was ready to mail eight messages, each coded in such a way that he would know who, if anyone, responded. He took the train to Manhattan, an hour and ten minutes away, to mail them. While there, he bought some deli salami and corned beef, the kind he couldn't find in Port Jervis. That night, to Ruth's delight, he prepared Reuben sandwiches for dinner.

It took three weeks for one of the bloggers to post a nearly complete copy of Mel's original mailing, and it went viral within minutes.

Bob Fellowes was next to refer to it in an hysterical rant:

"They're here among us, and have been since the forties! Maybe longer! What's their purpose? What are they after? How many have come? Forty or fifty at a time! Year after year! For decades! There could be many thousands of them walking among us! Call your congressmen! Call the president's office! Call your governors! America, we demand answers! They've had time to be assimilated, to have families, to infiltrate every level of government! Who's in charge, us or them?" His voice became more and more shrill as he raved.

Mel was both fascinated and alarmed at the way conspiracy theories were advanced by mid October. The invasion had to be worldwide, else why had the Soviets launched Sputnik? Had they been starting a search for extraterrestrials on the moon or Mars, or possibly a mother ship in orbit out there? And why had the United States launched a desperate push to get to the moon and to Mars if not to conduct such a search? And now, international cooperation on a space station. Advanced nations were cooperating in an unprecedented way. Searching for extraterrestrials?

A panel of experts in an hour-long television broadcast discussed the difficulty of detecting them. If they existed, they repeated often. DNA samples might possibly identify them. Autopsies were the only conclusive method, of course. One Harvard professor said: "Keep in mind that such advanced technology that allows them to navigate interstellar space would allow them to conceal their identities in a manner that we are unable to imagine."

Another panel discussed what possible threats hostile extraterrestrials could pose, with the most obvious one being the release of a pathogen to which they had immunity and humans didn't. Were they waiting for a predetermined critical moment of their own—sufficient numbers, for example—to launch an attack? Or were they waiting for sufficient infiltration of all levels of government and industry?

Mel had sent his original material to one senator and two representatives along with the others. The senator responded, as he had expected him to. A serious legislator, no doubt he had turned the matter over to one of the intelligence agencies. One representative, two bloggers, and Bob Fellowes also responded. Mel sent them all identical messages, taking the same care he had shown before, and mailing his answers in Manhattan again. His message was simple and short: "No more until I feel

safe. The Whistleblower Protection Act can't protect me. My life is in danger."

A week after he mailed his response, two congressmen demanded hearings in the House of Representatives. One of the bloggers demanded all memos, communications, records, reports, etc. regarding Project Skylight through the Freedom of Information Act. It wasn't clear exactly which agency he petitioned. And Bob Fellowes became even more hysterical.

By November Mel knew it was time to reveal the hoax, to prove to the country, possibly to the world, that the populace had been primed to believe any nonsense that was presented.

He sat at the computer to write his confession and stared at a blank screen. When the alarm sounded hours later, the screen was still blank, and he left to start dinner. Tomorrow, he told himself.

Day after day he sat at the computer and stared at a blank screen. Where to start? How to start? He felt as if his fingers had frozen, his brain had turned to stone. He had lost faith in words and had to consult a dictionary to look up the word *hoax*, which had become as alien as the invaders he had invented. All the phrases and sentences he thought of while sleepless in bed vanished by the time Ruth left for the high school.

PROJECT SKYLIGHT IS A HOAX! He sat back and looked at the words, deleted them. They weren't even his own words. Day in, day out various people were saying that, to no avail. Learned people, people in authority, officials were saying that, only to be drowned out like whispers in a thunderstorm.

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No matter what single word he keyed in, it continued to exist as isolated as a pinpoint island in the middle of the ocean. Nothing followed. Nothing could logically follow. The screen remained blank.

Penny and Ryan came for Thanksgiving and although Ruth prepared a traditional feast, which was as delicious as it always had been, there was an air of unease at the table. Laughter and banter, gaiety all seemed forced, as if they were amateur actors in a poorly rehearsed play.

Serving pumpkin pie, Ruth asked Penny, "Is there something bothering you?"

Penny glanced at Ryan, and her forced smile vanished. She nodded. "Ryan talked to his folks about the holidays, to let them know we'd like to visit them over Christmas for a day or two." She looked at Ryan again, then mumbled, "You tell them."

He appeared as strained as she did. "Mother wanted to know if you two had your DNA sample done yet. If Penny had."

"They don't want me to come until I do it," Penny said in a low voice.

"Oh, for God's sake!" Mel said. "The whole thing is a hoax. Some bored teenager having himself a joke. They aren't buying that crap, are they?"

Ryan nodded. "They are, and a lot of others are, too. Everyone born after 1940 eventually will be tested, DNA sampled. That lets my folks out." He put his fork down. "Do you remember my brother Jack? He was at our wedding and the reception."

Mel had a vague memory of him. Older than Ryan, receding hair, quiet. He nodded.

"He works in the state department," Ryan said. "He hears things, knows things. He said the government is taking this seriously, testing people, lie detector tests, trying to find a leak. He said whoever started this business has to be someone who knows, and has taken sophisticated steps to protect his identity, changing details here and there, but the gist of it is on the mark."

Ruth gasped and made an involuntary gesture that knocked over her wine glass. Hurriedly she left the table and for a moment Mel thought it was to bring paper towels or something to soak up spilled wine, but she headed for the hallway to their bedroom. Before he could follow, she was already returning with her handbag. Ignoring the wine spreading on the tablecloth, Ruth took a folded paper from her bag and handed it to him.

"This came yesterday," she said.

It was a memo from the superintendent of schools. Mel scanned it quickly, then read aloud the concluding sentence, "All personnel are required to submit a notarized copy of their DNA results to this office before the winter semester starts on January 4."

Mel felt as if the world was fading, or he was fading from it, and only gradually he became aware of Ryan's voice again.

"It's happening all through the government. No publicity yet. But it will get out and then it will be hell. It isn't a kid in a basement playing games, but someone who knows too much. They'll track him down and he'll never be heard from again, that's for sure. Psycholinguists are studying the text. Analyzing it. Educated, proper use of grammar, repetition of words, use of certain words over others. If the guy ever wrote a thing that was published, they'll track him down that way. Apparently he used a code that included a lot of Cs, Ys, and Os. Twice it was CY, a number, then CO. Pronounce it," he said. Then he did so, "C Y C O, psycho. He's mocking them. They've put cameras on every mail drop box in New York City. Tracking purchases of paper and stamps. Investigating photocopy shops, train and plane trips to New York. They've pulled out the stops. They'll find him and he'll have a fatal accident or disappear exactly the same way all those people who saw aliens come to earth did."

Mel didn't know when he had sat down again. He was in his chair, watching the blood red stain spread on the white tablecloth. ○

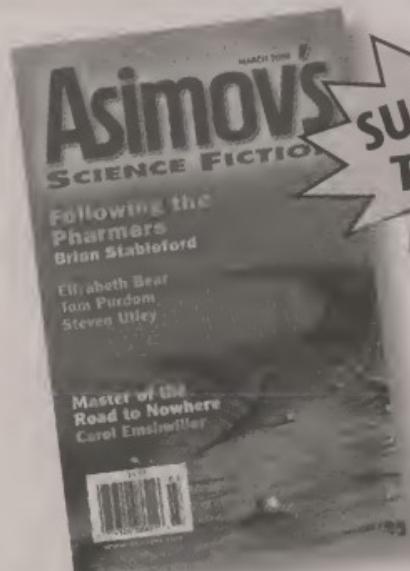
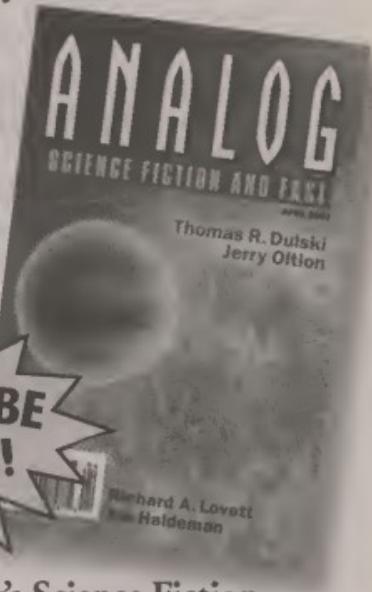
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UNDER THE THUMB OF THE BRAIN PATROL

Ferrett Steinmetz

Although his last story for *Asimov's*, "Camera Obscured" (September 2009), was about a very odd teenager, Ferrett Steinmetz denies that he has an unhealthy obsession with high school adolescents, still, after reading his new story we may be forgiven for wondering if the author doth protest too much. Ferrett lives in Cleveland with his wife and a very protective ghost. His blog can be found at <http://theferrett.livejournal.com>.

Once, David had dared to go to school without a two-millimeter layer of Vaseline slathered over his skin and hair. He figured he was faster than the Neurals, he could dodge—but at lunch, Claw-Armed Hector used a sound suppressor to glide up behind David. David felt the edge of the comb-scraper riffling his hair and jumped away, but it was too late.

"Gotcha," winked Hector, brandishing a handful of usable DNA at him.

A week later, and Claw-Armed Hector had made a little clone of David. The Neurals had dressed it up in a football jersey with David's number, three feet of hairy muscles wearing a contorted version of David's face that looked like him taking a dump. That was appropriate, because "taking a dump" was all the clone did; the Neurals brayed laughter as it scampered down the hallway and flung stringy feces at the back of David's neck as he tried to ignore their screams of, "*Runningback just wants to play catch, Piggie! Go long, Piggie, go long!*"

Thankfully, after a week Runningback peed an ugly soup-green, then shriveled up and died. David felt bad for it, but the Neurals just left the body in the hallway, gliding off in their gravchairs to torment somebody else. When his mom called the principal to complain, Professor Kakodkar just chuckled and said, "Well, Mrs. Carlisle, scientists will be scientists...."

The Neurals always could find interesting things to do with fresh jock DNA. They'd made a tailored virus that made Allie swell up in boils for a week. So David had learned to endure the stickiness and the fouled keyboards, and he never ever entered the brushed-metal halls of Bolyai High without sealing his skin off.

Except today, he'd overslept.

David burst through the school's glessteel double-doors, late for class and hellishly unprotected, every inch of skin crawling. He wanted to run through the crowds—he loved running—but instead he slumped down, trying to hide his height. If he could look very small and inoffensive, maybe the Neurals wouldn't notice him today.

Except maybe Valencia. Valencia might save him if he explained that he'd tried to build a clock for her. . . .

He ducked around a corner, and something grabbed at his shoulder. He dove to one side before it could get purchase, heading for the safety of the locker rooms—but someone tackled him to the floor.

"It's just *me*, you big lunk," said his best friend Allie, beaming with the pleasure of having wrestled him down. "And you're still too slow to corner."

Allie wore her football jersey, her blonde hair pulled back into a thick, glistening rope. David hated being around her when she wore that jersey—wearing the school colors was begging the Neurals to pick on you—but Allie shrugged it off. "It doesn't matter what we wear," she said philosophically.

She gave him a quick squeeze, then frowned. She cupped his chin in her palm. "Are you *unshined*?"

"I overslept," he grumbled, hoping she'd let it go at that—then dove for cover again as the wing of a juddering wasp-servo nearly sliced his forehead open. He got back to his feet as it reoriented and zipped away, sending a cluster of preppies scattering.

"Five bucks says it fails," Allie said, watching it struggle to carry a bottle of Bawls Guarana back to its owner.

"No deal," David said. It arced up to the ceiling to circle the fluorescent lights in sinking figure-eights, its antenna-sensors fixating on them like a moth. AI routines were hard, even for Neurals—if David could only understand the principles behind wasp-servo flightpaths, then he could probably build a gravchair, and then he might become Valencia's assistant. . . .

Allie jarred him out of his reverie. "Speaking of broken routines, why did you oversleep?"

"Allie, let's head to class, it's none of your—"

"As my star quarterback and best friend, *you're* my business," she said. "So don't lie. Why?"

David slumped. "I tried to build an alarm clock."

What he didn't say was how he'd lied to the clerk as he'd bought the Atomika Prefab Alarm Clock kit, telling her it was for his little brother. The box said it was "a perfect introduction for third-grade adventurenauts to learn how to build a neutronium clock!"—but even though he was almost eight grades over the age minimum, he'd botched whiteboxing the circuitry.

Allie sighed, running her fingers through her hair in exasperation, then used the excess grease to smear her old Vaseline on David's cheeks.

"David, I know Valencia stopped Intron's nanobots from devouring your clothes last week—but she just wanted to crack his encryption matrix. We're all just lab mice to that girl. Did you enjoy building that clock?"

David frowned. "Maybe I just get tired of feeling dumb."

"Maybe you should be tired of worrying what those stupid Neurals think about you."

"I'll stop that when they stop thinking I'm their chewtoy," he grumbled.

Allie nodded in sad acknowledgment. Allie didn't *like* the Neurals, but she couldn't ignore them.

"Got any more Vaseline?" David asked hopefully.

She rummaged around in her duffel bag and pulled out a small plastic container—just enough for emergency touch-ups. "It's all I have," she said, then reached out to smear some on his arms.

"I'll, uh, do it myself," he mumbled, snatching the container out of her hands. "Get to class, I'll catch up."

He knew Allie didn't mind the freakishly hard bulges of his biceps, but his stomach

still churned whenever anyone touched his body—especially Allie. She was so disgustingly toned that you could actually see her muscles flexing underneath her skin; when her shirt hiked up, you could see her ribs, the concavity of her stomach. And when they were together like this, with all the students staring at them as they marched by, it was as though her ugliness magnified his.

The first-period bell rang, oscillating up through the scale. David's stomach quivered; the Neurals had hacked the alarm system in yet another attempt to find the Brown Note.

"Well, now we're both late for Robotics," Allie said, crossing her arms. "I'll wait."

"Thanks." He was glad to have Allie as a friend—he loved the way she went after anyone on the football field, no matter how big—but two jocks dating would be asking for new worlds of humiliation.

He ducked into the bathroom and smeared a thin layer of grease over his arms, sickened by the way it brought out the pukish brown of his tan.

They snuck in through the wide double-doors of the robotics lab. They crouched behind the pallets of loose circuit boards, avoiding the dim amber glow of the spectrum analyzers as they made their way to the front of the class. David never knew what any of the big equipment did, aside from produce wriggling sine waves—but their heavy black cases gave them cover as they snuck towards the front of the room.

The robotics lab was so huge and spacious, yet the football field was a gopher-infested patch of unmowed lawn. David felt a pang of envy as he and Allie padded towards Professor Oblongata's droning voice. There were rumors of backwater schools where people respected football—places where football had as much cachet as, say, the drama club. And wouldn't that be nice?

David saw Valencia, and froze.

She was at the front of the class with the Neurals as always, their gravchairs bobbing like silver buoys, but David could pick her out because of her paper-pale skin. Valencia was Bolyai High's top science whiz, and had the flesh to prove it—a body that had barely seen sunlight, but lit up beautifully when the hails of electric sparks rained down and she raised her flabby arms in triumph. He imagined slipping his arms around Valencia's perfectly pear-shaped body. . . .

Allie jammed her elbow in his ribs. "Stop gawking and find a seat," she hissed.

They crept into the back, where the jocks and burnouts sat. Fortunately, it wasn't hard to sneak by Professor Oblongata; she'd been one of Bolyai High's most promising graduates until a lab experiment had blinded her. Now she had two webcams jammed into her eyesockets, which she claimed allowed her to see in every spectrum from infrared to ultraviolet, but everyone knew her motion sensors were glitched; if you moved slow around her, she almost never noticed.

". . . and that's how you create a field-programmable gate array using a hyperdimensional whitebox," she finished.

A couple of seats over, Freddie Kossover raised his hand. Freddie was half a head taller than David, an outfielder on the understaffed baseball team, and looked just as confused as David felt.

"Ma'am, I barely know what a whitebox is," he stammered. "Or why I'd use a gate array over a, a . . ."

"Digital signal processor?" Valencia sniggered, leaning back like a queen in her custom-built gravchair. Her sycophants thumbed buttons on their armrests; "RTFM, N00B" holograms popped up to do insulting dances, just before the additional strain on their power supplies sent their floating chairs rattling down to the linoleum.

Professor Oblongata's scarred lips pulled up in disgust.

"You should have been *thirsting* for knowledge, Frederick," she said, slapping her palms onto Freddie's desk, "You should have been reading manuals, looking up

schematics, figuring things out on your own. It's not my job to save you—nor can I at this point. The world has left you behind. What did you do all those years, Freddie? Play ball?"

Freddie's lip quivered. Valencia tapped a button; a holographic bugle glimmered into existence and played "Taps."

"Too late now, I'm afraid," said the Professor, limping to the front of the room to stand proudly among the Neurals. "Some of us will never understand why a digital signal processor is best used in artificial intelligences with pathfinding requirements . . . and others will master that technology." She rapped her leather-gloved knuckles briskly on Valencia's forcefield, producing a shower of sparks.

Valencia looked up at the professor with a loving respect. David quivered with jealousy.

"If the professor is so smart," Allie whispered, "Why isn't she making a fortune off her patents?"

"I assign you to smarter students," Professor Oblongata continued, "In the faint hope you'll scavenge some crumbs of knowledge. Today, you geniuses will teach the dimwits how to fabricate AI circuits using a nanobit whitebox." The Neurals groaned; the professor held up a finger. "*Tut!* Valencia! You're with Carlisle today."

David leapt to his feet, standing at attention as the professor called out the other pairings—but Valencia looked past him, searching the class.

"You're with Piggie," Claw-Armed Hector told her.

"Oh, *him*," Valencia said. She sailed past David without a glance.

Crushed, he followed her to her workstation, which had a pair of spotless white-boxes nested in tangles of wires. Dust motes winked out of existence as they kissed the whitebox's translucent frame; it absorbed dust and stray particles to use in its fabber engine.

"We're supposed to make a visual tracking chip," she said absently, scanning the broadcast schematics. "Too simple. Let's make a six-foot robot that kills flies with a paperclip Gatling gun."

"S-sure," David said. Maybe she'd need a case welded together—he was good at doing stuff with his hands.

"I didn't ask for *permission*, Piggie. Now go fetch me 5ccs of mercury and a jar of grapheme while I hack these paltry antiques."

When he returned she was rewiring the whitebox, giving David time to sneak a glance at her. She sure knew how to dress—a black "GOT ROOT?" T-shirt with stylish orange Cheeto smears, overalls, perfectly mismatched socks.

"Uploading the schema to the boxen," she announced, dumping the materials into the input slots and pulling brass goggles down over her eyes. The sparkles on the generators shifted spectrum from an opalescent white to a deep, molten red. Acrid smoke squirted out the sides.

"Valencia," he said.

"Not now," she said, looking down at her holodisplay. "I'm calculating the gear ratios for the central motor."

"But Valencia . . ."

She was scowling at her CAD program, dragging schemata on top of each other. The boxes began to emit a shrill whine, rattling on the countertop as the glass began to crack.

"*Valencia!*" he cried, tackling her away—but it was like bellyflopping onto a hot grill. His shirt caught fire, blistering his stomach as his body flattened against her force field; it flexed like a balloon. The motors in her gravchair whirred as they fought to keep her upright, her emergency wheels scraping a rubbery squeak across the floor.

To his embarrassment, the boxes didn't even explode—they just collapsed inwards with a pathetic tinkle.

Valencia frowned as equations streamed across her readouts. David braced himself for punishment. If he'd damaged her chair, he might wind up smashed through a wall, or miniaturized, or—

But when she looked up, those beautifully gray eyes were staring at his arms with wonder. She chuckled, exposing perfectly yellowed teeth as she nudged her gravchair closer to him.

"The accelerometers show they dampened a shock-force of almost 89Gs. That's in the ninety-fifth percentile—quite an anomalous cluster of muscle mass you're packing there." She reached out to stroke his biceps, tracing their muscle structure.

"Thank you," he said.

"You're heroic, too." She palpated his shoulder experimentally, and he felt like his knees had melted; he grabbed the counter for support. "You could have just taken cover."

"I wanted you safe."

"Excellent motivation," she murmured, licking her perfectly chapped lips. "So, Piggy—ever been to a science fair?"

Allie stepped in between them. "His name's David," she said. "He can't build a damn thing."

David should have been angry, but when Valencia smiled like that he felt as weightless as a Neural in a gravchair. He stepped around Allie to put his hands on Valencia's console.

"I've built stuff," he begged. "Not good stuff, but I try hard. Real hard."

"All good heroes try hard," she purred. "I've got an opening on my crew for someone who's not scientifically gifted. Someone who's willing to delve the depths of his strength. Give me a DNA sample for access, and you've got an invite to this Saturday's fair."

She fished a buccal swabbing kit out from her toolbox. She was asking for prime DNA from live cheek cells—full chains, not stray snippets extracted from dead hair.

Allie grabbed his arm. The other Neurals crowded around them.

"David," she whispered, "*They're sniggering.*"

They were. But Valencia wasn't. Her cool gaze held no promises; she merely wagged the swab at him.

"They won't be laughing come Saturday." He jabbed the cotton tip into his mouth, then offered it to Valencia. "Count me in."

David drove out from the suburbs, hoping no one would see him in a dirty puttering car as he steered the Pinto out to the farms at the outskirts of town. Only preps and jocks lived in the suburbs, tiny places where your lawn had barely enough room for a toolshed workshop. Valencia's mom, flooded with money after she'd invented a method of accelerating isotope decay, had bought a sprawling farm for her experimental facilities. The old cornfields had been cut down and buried under clean white corridors filled with cutting-edge equipment—the perfect place for a weekend science fair.

He called Allie again; no answer. She hadn't talked to him since he'd accepted the invite, which sucked. Here was his big day, and it felt empty without her. Why couldn't she just be happy for him?

His shoulders ached as he turned the steering wheel, but the pain comforted him—he'd been bench-pressing way past his limit for the past two days, hoping to impress Valencia. He'd even bought a lab coat, and though the largest size was still too small for him, he looked stylish.

As he pulled up to the house, Valencia's lab was as impressive as he'd dreamed—a huge wooden dome nailed together in a mostly circular shape by her family work-bots, shimmering with hologram-projected neon colors. He stopped, breathless, as the dome became the Earth—and then a series of volcanic eruptions formed a jagged "V," scarring the face of North America.

The hulking sentrybot analyzed a lock of David's hair, then unlocked the gear-gates. . . . And David realized that this was not just a science fair, but a Darwin Dance.

All Bolyai High's most accomplished Neurals were here, shuttling back and forth between steel vats, the motions of their gravchairs stirring patterns in the oily meat-smoke that clung to the floor. There were dangle-armed monstrosities suspended in vats of green fluid; thorned tentacles flopped out of the murk as each Neural strived to force-evolve their creations into the deadliest bio-soldiers. He could smell the vomitous stink as the assistants hauled the slick, tumorous failures out of the vats and shoved them into the incinerator.

David flexed his hands eagerly. *He could drag bodies.*

He searched the crowd for Valencia—but as the doorway ratcheted shut behind him, all the gravchairs hummed to a stop; the Neurals revolved to face him. Claw-Armed Hector stuck out one gleaming arm to point at him, a diamond-tipped laser winking angrily on the end.

"First level," he declared.

Malicious laughter rippled through the crowd. The Neurals closed in, and David shrank away from the glint of their force fields. His feet felt too heavy—he had no chair to lift him up. . . .

They backed away as Valencia coasted up behind him, putting a hand on his shoulder. Her touch was firm, possessive.

"Third level," she riposted.

Hector chuckled. "TPK. Guaranteed."

David didn't like the way they encircled him. They seemed to be stalking him, like cats. He pressed against Valencia's chair for protection, and realized with a thrill that he was touching warm metal; she'd let down her forcefield for him.

"You want me to haul bodies for you?" he asked, eager to satisfy. "I've been working out. . . ."

She laughed, amused, and once again he felt that humiliating rush of gratitude. She glided toward the center of the room, parting the Neurals before her.

"I bet you have, David," she purred; he trotted behind, trying to keep up. "In fact, I've bet on your strength. Ever read Tolkien?"

"I never got into that fantasy stuff," he said. "It was too fake."

"Fake?" she retorted. "Do you know how linguistically *consistent* the Elvish language is?"

The Neurals laughed again, and he wanted to say that it wasn't the language that was fake, but the fights. Allie liked to read fantasy books out loud and then have them reenact the fights exactly as described, which invariably ended with them falling over in an unbalanced Twister pile. But he couldn't say that; it'd just remind them that he played sports.

Then again, he'd never understood why they *should* be reading books. Why press your nose to a page when there was an outdoors to explore? He and Allie both adored the simplicity of running across the football field on a hot summer day, feeling their legs pumping, exulting in the way their bodies plucked footballs out of mid-air. He loved the squeeze of Allie's arms around his ribs when she tackled him, the smell of being mashed into the grass.

For the first time, it occurred to him that the Neurals only learned how the world worked so they could turn it into something else.

"I just don't like fantasy, is all," he said, and was surprised to find no hint of apology in his voice.

"Of course," she said. "You probably don't read much. But smart students love fantasy. We play D&D in our spare time. Ever roleplayed?"

"Once or twice," he said. The math had confused him.

"Enough to know the basics, then," she said.

A trap door opened up underneath him.

David flailed at empty air as he dropped straight down. He rolled with the fall, landing on a pile of straw before he smashed his forehead into a stone wall. Blood spattered onto the flagstones.

Flagstones? he thought, feeling the first sickening glimmers that Allie was right.

He peered through the shadows; the walls were made of limestone blocks, furred with mold, lit by blazing torches jammed into iron holders. It was a small room, maybe ten feet by ten feet wide, with a shut, iron-banded door leading out to the north. Fluorescent light streamed down from the party above, broken only by the shadowed tops of gravchairs poking in as the Neurals peered down.

A set of brown shoulder pads rested on a wooden table. He picked it up; it was made of hardened leather.

"We got curious," Valencia said. "How accurate were those hit point stats? What were the to-hit roll percentages in real life? It occurred to us that there'd be a lucrative market for the first scientifically tested roleplaying system. And there was only one way to get *that* information . . ."

He wiped the blood from his eyes. "You want me to *fight*?"

"Think of the applications for videogames, David! Statistically correct fighting tables! The military might want in!"

He shuddered at the thought; he'd kicked the clone-monkey of himself once, and even though it was halfway dead it had still been able to stuff him into a locker.

"You should be complimented, David; after that chair-shove you gave me, I rated you at sixteen strength. Tonight you'll prove that you *are* a third-level fighter!"

"I'm not budging," he said, checking his cell phone; of course it was jammed.

"Finicky roleplayers *always* need a motivation," she sighed. "But no worries, I gave you one. You, David—you must save the princess!"

A cloudy pool of smoke rose up at his feet, an effect spoiled by the choppy resolution of the holocams embedded in the floor. The cloud dissolved to reveal Allie, dressed in an unflattering chainmail bikini, fastened to a workbench with bungee cords. Behind her, a seething mass of tentacles lashed against a precariously thin force-wall. Allie yanked at the cords, her face red with fear—and David leapt at the pool as if he could save her, feeling dumb when his hands splashed around in the light.

"She's in no real danger," Valencia reassured him. "Well, probably. That is a Shoggoth-class biohazard. All you need to do is get to the end of the dungeon before it breaks loose."

"This isn't science!" he yelled. "It's just . . . crazy!"

"Now, now. You won't get a cut of the proceeds if you keep *that* up. Hurry, now—I don't know how long that force field will hold back my little love-craft . . ."

She tossed a sword down; it clanged off the flagstones.

With a growl, David hooked his fingers into the cracks in the stone walls.

The Neurals backed away, exchanging worried glances; they were so used to their gravchairs that it had never occurred to them that someone might simply climb out. David felt the power in his arms as he hauled himself upward, watched them flinch backward . . .

The limestone peeled away underneath his fingers.

David's ass hit the floor. He clutched two rectangular tiles of façade in his hand; they'd been hot-glued to the wall, and now two squares of modern cinderblock looked out at him.

Valencia regained the presence of mind to mash the button that slammed the ceiling shut. But even though he was trapped again, David felt better. Valencia's family had a lot of workbots, but even she couldn't dig a full dungeon. They'd just tricked out her basement to look cool.

Better yet, they'd been *afraid* of him.

David put on the leather armor over his lab coat. The sword had the words "+1: MAGIC" engraved on the hilt, but when he swung it experimentally a gyroscope buzzed and threw off his aim.

David tried to remember what sorts of things were in dungeons as he tugged the doorhandle. It was hard to see through the smoke of the guttering torches, but he could just make out a long, wide corridor with the same limestone pattern—and . . .

A hulking bruiser, its bloodied knuckles brushing the floor. It held a Louisville Slugger with crooked nails hammered into the end.

"Goddammit, Valencia," he whispered under his breath.

"Get moving, David," Valencia's voice buzzed in his ear. "I promise you the princess is in this castle, but I don't know how long she'll last."

He sized up the brute. It stared at the wall across from it, waiting for David to make his entrance. It dug a finger deep into its nose, so far back David could swear it was scratching the back of its skull, then pulled it out with a *slorp*. Then it let the hand drop back down to the floor, disinterested in it and everything else.

It looked *sad* to David. It was just dead inside until he showed up. And after their battle, win or lose, Valencia would incinerate it like so much scratch paper. This thing was designed to be used, discarded, and forgotten.

David knew that feeling.

He charged down the hallway, determined not to kill it.

But his sword whirred eagerly, drawing its attention. David was surprised how slow it was, moving with arthritic reluctance—but it bared sharpened teeth at him, raising its bat high to smash him down.

He head-faked left and juked right, leaping strong, flinching as the end of the bat splintered near his heels.

"Our first dodge! Start populating those combat tables, folks!" Valencia said.

"Goddammit, this isn't *funny*!" he shouted, ducking as it grabbed for him. He raced down the hallway, determined to leave the bruiser alive just to spite Valencia.

His sneakers slapped against the flagstones with a scuffing noise, which turned rapidly to a plastic, hollow *thrap*.

David dropped the sword and hurled himself forward just as a door salvaged from the lid of an old dumpster pivoted downward to reveal a ten-foot pit. His knees banged against solid stone.

"Okay, that jump was five hundred—" Valencia said, and a sharp squeal of feed-back arced into silence.

He turned just in time to watch the sword plunge into the pit. Lathed wooden stakes poked out of fresh loam. *Are they trying to kill me?* he wondered—then realized they probably had experimental healing potions to try on him.

The bruiser was still coming for him. It had his face. Now he knew why Valencia had wanted his DNA.

It jogged to the edge of the pit. It was maybe eight feet wide, easily crossable with a running leap for something that big. But it wasn't bright enough to understand that it needed forward momentum—so instead, it took a standing jump, almost a hop.

It almost made it.

Its chest smacked against the side of the pit. It squealed in panic, its hands scrabbling on the flagstones for purchase. Its face had the same brainless fear David had when he ran through Bolyai High's hallways. . . .

David grabbed its hand.

Its clammy skin felt like raw chicken underneath his fingers. He heaved backward. As the bruiser realized what David was doing, it cooed like a startled baby.

"Come on!" David screamed, tugging. It was too heavy, still falling towards the stakes.

But it fell *slowly*. The bruiser's spadelike feet pushed the stakes aside.

It grunted. Then it hunched down and leapt upward, its hands hooking over the lip of the pit like a basketball player going for the dunk.

David scurried backward. It grabbed his foot and clambered out, pushing itself up with its free hand, its muscles bulging like tires about to blow. . . .

It let him go and stood up.

David would have preferred a slobbering hug as confirmation that it wasn't going to kill him, but understood that was too much to ask. The brute was not—and never would be—a cuddler. Instead, it gave him the disinterested look that a cat gave to a mouse that wasn't quite worth eating.

"I'm . . . going to go," David said.

It rumbled past him toward the other end of the hallway, which opened onto a circular stone chamber. There were three doors with three separate carvings—a bundle of twigs, a blurred cat, a treasure chest.

The brute walked to a blank section of wall and punted, hard, into the limestone tiles. The tiles shattered, revealing a metal door.

A secret passage, he thought. Of course.

The brute kicked again and the door crumpled inward, revealing a maintenance tunnel with fluorescent lights, snaking cables, half-built props. David walked in.

"You coming?" he asked, looking back, but the bruiser had returned to its post in the hallway. He supposed a personal escort had been too much to ask. David ducked into the tunnel, weaponless; the far end was obscured by thin tendrils of smoke.

The hallway opened up to reveal the restraining cages they'd used to move the monsters to their starting locations. David realized that this wasn't a door that he'd been meant to discover; it was the way they'd brought the bruiser in, and the only way it knew out.

He waited for some protest from Valencia as he entered the backstage. None came.

The hallway arced around to a control center, a semicircular bank of monitors and fader switches. Masking-tape labels listed the horrors he'd been scheduled to face: KOBOLD TRAP, DISPLACER BEAST, MIMIC. But half the monitors were staticky, and the remaining cameras showed nothing but smoke and flame. A spilled can of Bawls Guarana dripped caffeine into the control panel, evidence that the directors of tonight's performance had rushed off.

What's going on here? David wondered, searching the screens for signs of Allie. She wasn't there, and he wasn't sure what he'd do if she was hurt.

A distant ululation echoed down the tunnels. A thud shook the hallway.

He took off down the tunnel, feeling the bite of the smoke in his lungs. He ran all the way toward the last door, labeled with a sign saying "BOSS BATTLE"—and was surprised to find Allie running back down the corridor to meet him, the links of her flimsy chain-mail bikini disintegrating with each succeeding step. She covered her breasts when she noticed him, blushing.

He flung his armor to the ground, wrapped his lab coat around her. "How did you—?" he asked.

"They're good with force fields," she said, shivering miserably. "But the bastards can't tie a knot to save their lives. Come on, David, we have to go—"

"What's happened?"

"The shoggoth self-evolved past their restraints. Really, they should have known that would happen. Come on, there's no time for questions—"

But he had to know. He kissed Allie on the forehead, then stepped past her to peer through the final door. They'd laid out a huge, alien temple for David to fight in, but the monster had broken free. It clawed its way toward the generators, its body sweating acid, eating ragged holes in its own skin; it heaved against the ceiling in anguish, threatening to collapse the dome with its dying convulsions. Its tentacles snapped out to grab the Neurals and their assistants as they rushed to euthanize it; they looked panicked, like ants trying to swarm an anteater.

Valencia led the charge, firing rockets at the thing's star-shaped head. But as David watched it surged forward to grab her, its coiled appendages sinking through her force field. She screamed in protest as it reeled her in. Her acolytes burned the tentacles away with lasers, but its acid ate into her face. . . .

In a flash, David saw Valencia years from now, her cheeks so scarred that bits of grooved jawbone poked out, teaching a class she hated, enduring a thousand dim students to try to find the one who might succeed where she had failed. And every night she'd lie in bed with the knowledge that if she was lucky she might, *might* be a footnote in someone else's biography, all her futures squandered, the best years of her life long gone.

All of this would pass, and make way for them.

"Hey," he said to Allie, who was standing behind him; she was covering a guilty smile as she watched Valencia shrieking orders.

"Forgive me?" he asked.

Beaming, she took his hand. They grinned at each other with the knowledge that their best days were all ahead—a smaller future, perhaps, but one that was only going to get better as time went on.

"Come on," he said as the explosions began. "Let's run." ○

TOURISTS FROM OUTER SPACE

Tourists from outer space
do not really experience our planet.
They rarely learn anything in Earth languages
beyond "How much does this cost?"
and "Where is the multi-species restroom?"
They hold their parties, their banquets,
their dances (if that's what those are)
by themselves. We do not mingle.
Even here, in our cities,
they live in their own worlds,
which they bring with them when they arrive
and take away when they depart.

—Darrell Schweitzer



SEVERAL ITEMS OF INTEREST

Rick Wilber

Rick Wilber's latest book, *Rum Point*, is a mystery novel published earlier this year by McFarland. The author's first story for Asimov's "With Twoclick's Watching" (January 1993), explored the human response to Earth's invasion by the S'hudonni—a group of significantly advanced aliens. Rick has returned to that universe every so often, and he does so again now with a stand-alone novella that takes an uncompromising look at how such an invasion might affect two very different brothers.

"The Earth does not argue, is not pathetic, does not scream, haste, persuade, threaten, promise. The Earth has no conceivable failures."

—Walt Whitman

Dangerous Comfort

I knew from that very first evening at Tommy's house, though it all took some time to finally happen. We were chatting, Heather and I, making idle conversation—something about The Ten, no doubt—and I could feel myself sliding away. I do not lose myself with women. I do not drift away into imagined passion. I am always in control. But with Heather, oh yes with Heather, I knew the danger and I didn't care. Seeing her. Listening. Imagining. She looked at me, she smiled, and I was lost.

And so, more than a year later, I sat in dangerous comfort, thinking the news from Earth couldn't be good or Twoclicks would never have invited me to meet with him during his afternoon soak.

I knew that he liked to warm himself like this when he was at home; but in the time I'd been on S'hudon not once had he invited me any farther into his personal quarters than that large front room where he keeps his Earthie artifacts: the baseball bat from the Splendid Splinter, the signed first editions by Yeats and Whitman and Wells, the Booth derringer that fired the shot that killed Abraham Lincoln, the de Koonings and the Rockwells and the two Picassos and the Monet, the top hat from Astaire's movie of the same name, Django Reinhardt's guitar and Stephane Grappelli's violin from the 1939 Hot Club performances in Paris; all of this accumulation and more tossed onto tables or hung haphazardly on walls cheek-by-jowl, disorganized, incomprehensible, like Twoclicks himself.

I was part of that accumulation, of course, and knew it; though I hadn't been hung on a wall just yet, or tossed onto a table. But the threat of that—or something quite like it—hung over me as I sat in the heat of the fumarole as it bubbled and gurgled in his backyard.

To get there I was escorted beyond the front room and on through the private dining area, the private living area, the very private bedrooms, and through the antique stonewood door and down the pumice steps and a hundred paces or more through the cold, soft grass and finally into the first and largest of the hot-spring mud baths, where Twoclicks and I sat, up to our necks in the warm goo.

The invitation I'd received was in print—Twoclicks fancies the archaic—on a small embossed card delivered by young Treble, his son and my favorite of the several princelings. The note was written in flowing formal S'hudonni script on the top and then in English, smaller, underneath: "Your presence is requested at soak on the morrow at the home of your mentor for a discussion of a matter of some importance regarding a troublesome situation on your home planet."

That sounded pretty damn ominous, and so once I was admitted to his home, directed to the changing room where I slipped out of my clothes, had a large towel wrapped around me, and then walked over to the hot, muddy spring and climbed in, I thought surely he'd get to the point quickly. But Twoclicks, as always, was indirect and in no particular hurry. Instead, he spent the first half-hour talking about various sporting events in the American District on Earth, where his favorite teams all seemed to be doing well. I tried to enjoy the warm muck and the sports talk while I waited for the conversation to get wherever it was really going.

The fog is cold and damp on the coast of S'hudon's southernmost island, and especially so when the wind is from the southwest and has blown over the frigid waters of the Great South Loop current. So the mud bath was a welcome break from the chill and the rain and the general grayness of the winter coast. Twoclicks faced the breeze as he started to talk, giving me the comfort of having my back to the wind. I didn't know if he was being purposefully polite or not. Then he paused and I was thinking this would be the moment when I'd finally hear the news about trouble back home. Riots? Famines? Floods? Plagues? Bombings? An insurrection? All of the above? But he just grew silent, perhaps the chill taking its toll on him or, more likely, he had just hit a lull, having said all he wanted to about the sports interests of the newly occupied minor planet at the edge of the empire.

A long minute or two went by as he stared at me, those round eyes beginning to blink more rapidly until I was sure he finally had something significant to say. Instead of getting on with it, though, he started sliding down into the hot mud, slipping deeper and deeper and slightly backward until, finally, only his mouth and eyes remained visible. He slid the second membrane of the right eye over its pupil and winked with the left eye—that's not a natural act for the S'hudonni and so he'd done this to impress me—and then, finally, he said something new: "Americanos! Conquerors! Libertad! Masses! For you a program of chants." Then, to punctuate whatever the hell the point of that was, he slid down again, disappearing entirely, that falsely closed eye the last thing I saw before he went under, where he could stay for an hour if he wanted.

The quote was from Whitman. Having seen the sexual proclivities of S'hudon's ruling classes, I wasn't surprised to find that Twoclicks had embraced old Walt from among the long readings list I'd offered. Whitman was certainly Twoclicks' kind of Earthie. But why that particular snippet? It must mean something or he wouldn't have said it, but I sure as hell wasn't getting the message. Americanos? Conquerors? Not hardly. Not anymore.

I thought about what once had been and what now remained back home, the old

United States gone the way of all empires, reduced to an "economic district." Twoclicks, who'd decided only recently that his title should now be Chancellor of the American District, was in control of most of the old U.S. and Mexico and some of the Caribbean islands. His brother, Whistle, called himself Governor General of the Canadian District, which included old Alaska along with Canada and parts of New England. Other relatives ran other districts and it was all very familial, if not particularly harmonious. The siblings and cousins had their rivalries and their competing districts not only on Earth but on all of The Seven planets that were part of S'hudon's empire.

For parts of conquered humanity, the reality of life under S'hudonni control was not all that different from how it had been before the Arribada. They worked, they played, they made love, they were hired and fired and married and divorced. They had children they loved or were disappointed in, and siblings they admired or loathed. They took vacations. They watched television. They Swepted and Tweeted and logged on and off as Earth continued to spin.

For these lucky millions, only the leadership had changed. Plus, S'hudon's gifts—the power generators and their grids, the medical tools and drugs, the transportation rails, the nanos for the lucky few—had been parceled out bit by bit in return for the locals' expressions of loyalty to the new order. They were useful gifts, I was sure, in rebuilding a shattered society and getting people back to work and living their lives. Expensive in their own way, but useful, very useful.

Others hadn't been so fortunate. Different districts found different profits, some of them consumed locally on Earth, like the poppies that fed a drug-hungry Europe or the entertainment from Japan that kept a whole world's minds off its losses. Others exported their goods offworld. The major grain producers—Canada and the U.S., Russia, newly irrigated Australia, parts of China and Brazil—these places grew the luxury crops that made money for the ruling classes back on S'hudon who bought cheap from Earthie labor and sold high around The Seven, where alcohol from Earth was all the rage, the tulips of empire.

This meant growing real grain and distilling and brewing real variations on alcohol. Growing a great deal of grain, in fact, some six times the harvest from the time before the Arribada.

There has been, in many places, some considerable disruption. Twoclicks felt bad about that, he'd told me again and again, and he seemed sincere. Of course I am far from perfect at judging S'hudonni sincerity. I'd been on the planet a year and I pretty much hadn't learned a thing. Except for what Heather had taught me. That's what was on my mind as I waited for Twoclicks to resurface. Heather. As always, it was Heather.

In the Long Run

On a typical day in my little Potemkin Village at the edge of the Great Bight I awake with the sunrise, dial up my internal Sweep to get it recording, and then brew some coffee (black, dark) and make some toast, both of these imported from home, as is all my food and drink.

After that I go for a long jog along the path they've paved for me atop the bluffs that overlook the bight. The pavement runs for three kilometers, eventually dropping down onto the Strand for another kilometer, where I can taste the salt spray and pretend, at least for a few minutes, that I am home.

Then I turn and jog home to my faux cottage on my ersatz street in my make-believe village. When the land breeze is blowing out to sea, as it often is, the air is redolent of S'hudon with the rotten-egg smell of sulfur from the inland fumaroles a

kilometer or two away and I can hear, in the distance, the sounds of Agitato, the vacation park where the S'hudonni stay when they visit this coast. Along with the sulfur there is a hint of inland marsh in the air, of still water and rotting vegetation and, on a good day, a hint of something nearly cinnamon and, often, the squeals of the S'hudonni children.

I am lucky, I suppose, that my enhanced Sweeper can capture the smells along with the sights and sounds of S'hudon. My current audience back home is around two hundred million, mostly in Twoclicks' district. Since Two has spent a fortune getting me here and constructing an environment for me, it is good to know that my message, and his, has an audience.

The Family Barge

Some months ago, Twoclicks invited me to go hunting—for good sport, as he put it—with his son, Treble, his older brother, Whistle, and his younger sister, Octave. They are bitter rivals, those siblings, but on that day they acted as if those rivalries were forgotten. We traveled on the family barge as it slowly wound its way down the main channel toward the sea on a cool, summer day, sliding our way through the water plants that grew ambitiously large during the short growing season.

Young Treble and I were on the barge, standing at the side rail and looking out toward the plants as we searched for our prey, a small amphibious creature the size and general shape of a small cat. It reached its juvenile, and tastiest, stage of development only for a week or two each year. Treble whistled and clicked its name and when I asked for a translation he said "bender" would do. Like some animals on Earth, the benders changed gender as needed. At the juvenile stage, they were all females. A few months later when it was time to reproduce, the larger, more aggressive ones became inedibly male.

Below us, the three S'hudonni were swimming effortlessly a meter deep, their motion so smooth that you couldn't see any ripples from their movement. The water was the color of strong tea.

The animal sat along the edge of one of those plants, serene, as we glided past it, no more than ten meters away. It ignored us, and then as we looked back to watch there was an upwelling from beneath the water plant and the three S'hudonni emerged simultaneously.

The bender never knew what hit it. And then hit it again. And then a third time, Twoclicks and Octave and Whistle each taking turns toying with it for a while before, in unison, they ripped it apart and Twoclicks brought me the still-beating heart so I could take a ritual bite. I'd skinned rabbits in my backwoods youth and Twoclicks had told me he admired that aspect of my childhood. Now I understood why.

There was no question about my response: Twoclicks was my sponsor and my behavior was important. I brought the heart to my lips, opened my mouth, took a small bite and then handed the heart back to Twoclicks. My nanos, I guessed, would neutralize whatever toxicity was in that bite.

Twoclicks smiled and took his own ritual bite, and then they all passed it around and did the same, including little Treble, who finished it off. Somewhere along the line the heart had stopped beating.

How did they know the prey was there, quiet and still on a pad floating atop the warm, muddy water of the slough? Sonar? A sensitive sense of smell? Some sort of infrared sense that can tell a slight heat change through a layer of mud and plant fiber? Some other sense I'm not aware of yet?

It could be any or all of those. What I know about the S'hudonni could fill a book—the very book you are reading, in fact, since that's why Twoclicks brought me here: to Sweep back home to all those simple Earthies about the wonders of mighty S'hudon and then to gather all that material into a book and a stemfeed and a linker and, I suspect, a touring minstrel show.

But what you learn in life, if you have half a brain, teaches you as much about what you don't know as what you do, and while what I found out about the S'hudonni could fill a thick, musty old-school book and all the new forms, too, what I didn't find out about S'hudon could fill a library. Ten libraries. A hundred. The S'hudonni are, by turns, kind and vicious, brilliant and stupid, physically handsome in their own way even while unspeakably ugly; simple and direct and unfathomably obscure. Their world and their empire are filled with these contrasts, rife with these contradictions. That much, at least, I'd come to understand.

Several Items of Interest About the S'hudonni

- 1) There is a small orifice just at the back of the dorsal fin.
- 2) Placing one of the fragile, small fingers from those delicate hands just at the edge of that small, black hole brings ripples of pleasure.
- 3) The sleek, taut, olive-colored skin across the flanks of the S'hudonni torso changes colors rapidly and constantly when sexually stimulated, waves of bright orange and yellow coursing over that skin.
- 4) A one-fingered caress over the thin black line that runs the length of the torso and separates the upper body from the lower also sparks a colorful stimulation, even when it's an Earthie—your faithful correspondent—doing the running of the finger.
- 5) The female S'hudonni can shiver with pleasure.
- 6) Assuming Twoclicks and his siblings are typical, the S'hudonni happily embrace sexual activity from any—perhaps all—of their friends and relations who join the party after a hunt is done. The patterns of these embraces struck me as mostly random.
- 7) Human involvement is oddly welcome. I hadn't realized that this would happen, but then I have a notable history of not knowing when I'm getting involved with strange women.

Storytelling

I have spent my life telling stories. My parents were disappointed in this. My mother was in corporate law and hoped I might follow in her capable footsteps and become an attorney. My father was a pediatrician, loved and respected by the families of the hundreds of children he served. The funeral cortege on the day that we buried him in Whispering Oaks was a half-mile long and made the local television news. He had been a community activist, raising funds for his favorite charities, vocal in his backing for the politicians he liked and admired. He and his wife were both good, strong, intelligent, caring people and expected their two sons to be the same.

Of course, they had some secrets, did Mom and Dad. At the end, those mattered.

But early on, Tommy lived up to our parents' expectations. The youngest son, he left high school with enough science credits to start in as a sophomore at Vanderbilt; then he sailed right through his undergrad biology degree before turning to research in grad school as the way to find his truths in life. His doctorate, his tenure at Rice

and then at the University of Florida, his research successes: these accomplishments won him respect and love from Mom and Dad, and they told him so often.

As for me, a bachelor's in English literature and a minor in history struck Mom and Dad as foolish and indulgent and my later choices in life confirmed their disappointment. I had been a good high school athlete, wasting my time (as Father put it) playing basketball and baseball for the high school teams and getting some ink in the local papers. I could handle the ball and shoot from outside in basketball, and I understood the game. In baseball I played the infield, second or short, and had good hands and a solid arm if not much of a bat. Ultimately this meant I got to play both sports at a good, small college in a suburb of Orlando. It occupied my time. It made me happy. Father and Tommy were busy, always, and rarely saw me play, in high school or college. Mom, bless her heart, was there often.

Ultimately injuries ended the fun and I turned to my studies, working my way to a master's in creative writing by serving as a grad assistant, teaching comp classes, and working for the college paper. I started sending sports profiles to magazines and websites and pretty soon some got published.

That turned out to be my level and, over time, I became a part-time teacher and a writer of magazine articles. I taught at a perfectly nice little liberal arts college in St. Petersburg, Florida, and I was good at that.

It's hard to get published—trust me, the odds are against you—so I was proud of my career, such as it was. But I wasn't published in the *New Yorker* or by Knopf and I wasn't teaching in the Ivy League. I told myself that it didn't matter. Later, when I started Sweeping and millions were paying attention, I came at last to admit something different.

Smoking

My father smoked cigarettes most of his life: Camels, good, strong stuff that he'd started in on while an undergraduate at Princeton. You might be surprised to hear how many smokers there are in the health field: nurses, doctors, EMTs, even some oncologists here and there. Stress, they will explain, is why they smoke. And, of course, their certain knowledge that as medical people they are immune to the diseases of more common men and women.

Father found out on his sixtieth birthday that the cough he feared was lung cancer was, indeed, small-cell, stage 3B, revised after the first surgery to stage 4. The radiation, the surgery, the chemo: they were all palliative and he knew it and we knew it.

Except for Tommy, the great research scientist, the Great Mind, the Boy Wonder who'd had research published while he was still an undergrad, the man who always Had The Answer.

Tommy kept insisting that Father should try one new trial or another, look for that wonder drug, keep up your hope, stay positive, beat this thing. Tommy, I thought, seemed increasingly angry with Dad for accepting the cancer, embracing it, allowing it entry into his life and death. As the weeks went by, Tommy's calm urgings with Dad turned into strident hectoring about battle and struggles and never giving up.

About a year after he got the news, on the last day of his life, my father walked over to me after yet another angry outburst from Tommy and said this to me: "Son, I do wish you'd done more with that fine mind of yours, but at least you've always been happy."

Then he shook his head. "Now, your brother, for all his brains and all his publications and all his money and all his awards: that's about the unhappiest guy I know."

Then he coughed, almost politely, and turned away from me.

We were all gathered at Tommy's house that day to share a Sunday meal and celebrate Tommy's being shortlisted for the International Prize for Biology. There were some delicious ironies there, since the prize honors Japan's Emperor Hirohito and while Tommy was on the list for his work in saving the Kemp's ridley sea turtles, the Japanese were still busy slaughtering whales. I mentioned this to Tommy. He just stared at me, shook his head, and turned away to talk to Mom, who was in the kitchen with him, both of them whispering to each other, I knew, over how disappointed dying dad was that I'd thrown my life away on scribbling when, early on, I'd held such promise. I had, after all, won the countywide science fair in sixth grade.

A couple of hours later Mom and I sat in folding chairs on Tommy's back deck and watched a distant line of storms boil and grow with rumbles of thunder.

"How long does Dad have?" I asked her, holding tight to my beer, some unpronounceable Belgian brand that Tommy liked. Me, I stuck with Corona.

"A month or two," she said.

"He looks better than that," I offered. "And he seems happy enough. I thought maybe things were a little better."

A slight shake of her head, a thin smile: "No, they're not. He accepted it a long time ago, Peter, that's all. The inevitability of it." She chuckled a bit. "I caught him in the backyard a couple of days ago smoking one of those Camels. I couldn't believe it, but he just said it didn't really matter anymore, so what the hell."

I didn't say anything, but looked out toward the distant thunderheads as they lit up the evening sky with half-buried lightning, miles away.

About an hour later I walked over to Dad to say goodbye. He got up off the couch and wouldn't let me stop him from standing. I gave him a firm handshake and his grip was just firm enough in return to be a reminder of who he'd been. I looked at him, gave him a quick, clumsy hug and told him I loved him.

"Thank you," he said. He seemed at peace.

As I got to my car in the driveway that line of thunderstorms was almost to us, but I beat the worst of the rain home. An half-hour later, just as I was pulling into my driveway, my parents were getting into their car for their longer drive home across the Sunshine Skyway and down to Sarasota. Dad, despite his health, always insisted on driving, a control freak right to the end. It was pouring by then, the blinding rain, the road across that high bridge. Rain, cancer, control and its lack: these are the things that ended my father's life and put my mother's into ruin.

Emerging

In the mud pit, some minutes had gone by and I was beginning to worry about when and how Twoclicks might emerge. Would he playfully attack me from underneath? Would he embrace me through the muck or run a thin, fragile finger along my spine? Would he stay down there for an hour or two while I sat like meat in a melting pot? My imagination was getting the better of me, but then I'd seen what I'd seen on S'hudon.

I heard the soft slap of flat, bare feet against the cold stone path that comes from the house to the fumarole. I turned to look and it was Heather: short and stocky, waddling along on those spindly legs, that upright shark shape useful to her when she was on S'hudon. She was smart and funny and strangely wise and I loved her in all her various forms, though I knew she was utterly a lie. I'd taught myself not to worry too much about that, despite the history we shared. Once, not that long ago—

looking very different in that place and at that time—she'd broken my brother's heart. For a while after that she enjoyed telling me that she was working on breaking mine. I used to laugh about that.

She stepped carefully down into the fumarole and slipped her body halfway in. She looked at me. She smiled.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi, yourself. You all right?"

"Fine," I said, "just fine."

"He thought it was time for you to know."

"Great," I said. "Know what?"

She stared. "He hasn't told you yet?"

"Told me what?"

"Oh, I can't be the one to say, Peter. This is all his idea; he should break the news."

And so I knew, from the way she said it. "It's about Tommy," I said.

"In a way. Mostly, in fact."

"And?"

"And nothing, Peter. I can't say any more. I won't."

On cue, a bubble, round and mottled in the mud, rose across from me, grew larger, tension straining, and then popped. It smelled like cinnamon.

And these creatures, I noted, were the masters of our universe.

The muck began to part underneath the spot where the bubble had burst and I saw Twoclicks' shuttered eyes rising, the nictitating membranes tight over them, the eyeballs visible within. Through the membranes he was looking at me. He rose a bit higher, so that his whole head was clear of the mud. The membranes slid up, disappeared. His eyes were clear.

"There iss trouble on Earth," he said with that annoying lisp that he used as an affection. Somehow it's terribly condescending. "It iss getting worse."

"There's always trouble on Earth," I answered. "Even before S'hudon arrived there was always trouble on Earth. And it was always getting worse. We Earthies do not play well together."

"Ah, but this time iss different."

"Sure," I said. "This time is different."

"Hass to do with your brother," he said, "and iss very troublesome. Blowing up distilleries and pipelines. Burning crops. Burning a lot of crops."

"And you can't stop that? With your screamships? The hired Canadians? All your technology and all your mercenaries and you can't stop the locals from burning some crops?"

He shrugged. It was an acquired gesture for him, since he doesn't really have much in the way of shoulders. "Guesss not," he said. "No. Certainly not. Cannot. Hass been going on for months now, all over northern areas of my district. Very low tech, friend Peter. Fly below radar ssort of thing, you know?"

Then he dropped what was, for him, the real bombshell. "Is so much trouble that family sayss it threatens profits. My brother says it will spread. He blames me, and this is very bad."

And having said that he smiled at me and turned to Heather. "You explain how brothers are," he said to her. And then he slid down again, the membranes coming over the eyes, the head sliding down into the muck. A bubble, a smoothing wave: he was gone.

Heather smiled at me. "You know how much Two hates confrontation, Peter. That wasn't easy for him, what he just did."

"Sure," I said, "it couldn't have been easy. So what's really the problem, Heather? It can't be some crops getting burned."

A bubble rose in the muck, popped. We both knew that Twoclicks was listening.

Heather gave me a complicated wink, which is hard to do in that body. Right, I thought, just us insiders. Wink, wink.

"The crops *are* a problem," she said, "and the distilleries and breweries and the production and transportation systems, those are problems, too. It must all be hand-crafted, you know, Peter. No enhancements, nothing artificial, wooden casks and barrels and the whole lot. The demand for this, this authentic Earthie alcohol in its various forms, is very high on Downtone and Blink right now and doing okay on the other planets of The Seven. Twoclicks needs to capitalize on that demand while he can, and expand the market before his siblings get in on it. He sees this as the opportunity he's been waiting a very long time for. It's his chance to rise in the hierarchy. His chance to please his father."

"Of course," I said, "he would certainly want to please the old man."

"Don't be snide, Peter, you know how it is."

And I did, in fact, know how that was, trying to please the old man.

It was a typical family squabble, the struggle between Twoclicks and Whistle; a brotherly disagreement over who had the bigger dorsal fin and which one their father loved more. They were both quite willing to spill blood over this.

Heather said, "Peter, the burning of the wheat and corn has meant significant loss for Twoclicks. He has contractual obligations to Whistle that he'll have a hard time meeting now. There are debts between the two of them. Two *has* to meet his obligations."

"Or else?"

"Or else war, I'd guess, Peter. This would be an excuse for Whistle to invade Two's territory. Here it would just be a family spat and the two brothers wouldn't talk to each other at family gatherings...."

She let that thought hang and I picked up on it. "But on Earth?"

"A lot of people would die before it got settled, Peter."

I knew Whistle pretty well and don't like him. He didn't like me, either, and I knew he thought of me as his little brother's Earthie pet. I resented deeply the truth of that.

Heather looked sad. "Understand, Peter, that despite what Two has said to you, this isn't any trouble that he can't fix. There's a screamship waiting in Earth orbit and all Twoclicks has to do is give the word."

"The word."

"The word to take out Tommy and his little band of merry men. De-orbit, a day or two of burns along the Lake Ontario shoreline where they're hiding out—mistakenly thinking we don't know where and how—and that's it. Done. Insurrection suppressed. Trouble over. Back to work on the farm, raising grain for handcrafted alcohol, making Twoclicks richer and more powerful and keeping Whistle at bay. Nothing to it."

"Then why the hell not just get in there...." And it dawned on me what she was saying. "Oh," I said. "Tommy."

She nodded. "Twoclicks wants you to go and talk with Tommy. Twoclicks thinks he owes you both that much. You and your brother helped Two when it mattered. You saved his life once and he recognizes the debt. Talk to Tommy, explain things to him, lay it all out for him."

"And you think I can get Tommy to stop?"

She shrugged. "If you don't stop him, Peter, Two will. He's just giving you a chance to settle it without bloodshed. He's doing this for you, because he owes you. Because he likes you."

"He doesn't owe me, Heather, I've told him that a hundred times. And hell, even if he did owe me, that debt has been paid twenty times over."

"He doesn't see it that way, Peter. You and your brother saved his life and for him

that incurs a deep obligation. He won't forget that. Ever." She stared at me. "But he *will* do what he has to do, Peter, and soon, to maintain control over the colony. Who would you rather have in charge, Two or Whistle?"

There was no question about my answer to that. Twoclicks was an odd character, but he had an interest in things Earthie other than profit. His various collections, his love for Earth's music and literature and art. His interest in me and in my Sweeps to the home world. He was the best of that bad lot by a long shot. "All right," I said, "sure, I'll go."

"Good," she said.

"When am I leaving?"

She smiled. "Right now. You only have a day or two before Whistle acts, I think, so the sooner the better. There's a kelly in a room upstairs in the main house."

"Do I take anything with me?"

"Sure," she said. "Me."

And so we left.

The Arribada

You have your memories of the first time you heard the news about the Arribada. You remember that the television was on and you were making love to your wife or your husband or your lover; or you sat by your mother's death bed and the nurse walked in to tell you the news; or you were in your favorite chair reading a book and a frightened neighbor knocked on your door, or you were eating a meal at an inexpensive restaurant and your waiter gave you the news; or you were walking your dog on a crisp, clear winter night and you happened to look up.

My memory of it is this: I was thirty-three years old and felt older as I headed home from the Stagger Inn in the little barrier island town of Rum Point. I'd been playing a little basketball with my friends, Eric and Nick.

On Tuesday nights we played in a half-court league at the local Y, three-on-three, twenty-minute running halves, call your own fouls, make-it-take-it. We weren't too bad. Tommy was on the team but hadn't been playing since our parents' death a couple of months before. He wasn't much of a player and we didn't miss him.

My knees hurt that night like they had since my college days and those three surgeries in five years. My right ankle hurt from the sprain of a month before that I'd never given it time to get over. My neck and right shoulder were sore from a bulging disk that my ortho said would eventually require surgery.

But, stupidly, I suppose, I loved playing basketball even though my playing days were long over and I was reduced to half-court three-on-three with my friends. So I'd taken a couple of ibuprofen an hour before the game and I'd take two more when I got home. In the morning, I'd struggle to get my legs over the side of the bed and stand up on those ankles and knees. But I'd do it, and walk into the bathroom where I'd take two more ibuprofen and then go teach my morning class. By ten A.M. or so I'd feel all right and I'd have taught my college students nearly everything that I could about nineteenth-century English and Irish writers.

I'd had four or five Flying Bison ales at the Stagger, which was okay because I lived five blocks from there and was walking home, cutting across the ball field where, in summers, I coached the local town baseball team, most of the players ex-college or high school athletes who still found something worthwhile in sore arms, pulled groins, sprained ankles, and bruised hips from clumsy slides. Every now and then I pitched in relief. I missed my youth.

And I missed my father.

The police gave me details on how he died: A driving rain on the big bridge over Tampa Bay. The pick-up truck to their left going much too fast for conditions and trying to change into their lane. The driver—a young guy running his own pool-cleaning business and hurrying home—lost control and started fishtailing. He clipped Dad's Lexus and sent it spinning just after the crest of the bridge where everyone starts heading downhill. The Lexus hit the right-side rail and flipped end over end as it climbed the rail and spun once or twice more while falling the one hundred feet into the water below. Airbags and belts kept Mom and Dad alive through all that, but sinking twenty feet to the bottom of the bay cost Dad his life.

Mom lived through it. She was on her cell phone with Tommy when this all happened. They were talking about me, sharing their disappointment over my career, and then he heard her crying out and heard Dad's angry curse and then nothing more for a few seconds and then an "Oh, sweet Jesus," from Mom as the car started to sink into the warm embrace of Tampa Bay. Mom managed to unclip her belt and the power windows still worked as she hit the button. She'd been a competitive swimmer at Harvard when she'd met Dad, and that background saved her as she got through the window and up to the surface. Only there did she have the time to think about Dad. So she went back down, the car nose down in the sandy bottom. She got back inside, got to her husband who sat there quietly, eyes open. She got to the belt latch, unsnapped it, tried to maneuver her way back out the window she'd come in, tugging and pulling on Dad all the while. Twenty seconds. Thirty. Fifty. Down there with Dad, trying to get him back. Trying very, very hard to get him back.

Months later it was a warm January night, the way it can be in Florida sometimes, and I was thinking I'd get the team together for some batting practice and infield workouts. The grass was green and perfect in the outfield as I walked across in the darkness, away from the town's lights. I stopped to take a deep breath, musing on the usual romantic nonsense about the smell of leather and infield dirt and the sound of cleats on wooden dugout steps and the lure of the crack of the bat against the ball.

For no particular reason that I can recall I looked up, and there were ten new satellites drifting slowly by from northwest to southeast as I watched, in a pattern that was a circle slowly turning ovoid as they crossed the sky. I'm the sort of person who pays attention to the news. A launch of something like this would have made it to the science page of the *Times*, which I'd read that morning in hard copy. The news on that page had been about global warming, the volcano in Japan, a new vaccine for Alzheimer's: nothing at all about multiple launches or satellites. I kept looking as I walked, moving faster the more I wondered. I got home. I turned on the TV and a pretty blonde on CNN was telling me about those bright lights in the night sky over North America. The Ten, as we came to call them. A squadron of visitors to our little corner of the universe. They'd arrived undetected and then winked into sight, just like that. And now, serene, they floated above us.

The Arribada, we came to call it, and we marveled and quaked. I'm sure you remember that first night, the next day. The wonder. The fear.

And you remember, I'll guess, the second week, too; and the third month, and the whole quiet year while those ships did nothing but drift overheard, quiet reminders, bright specks in the blackness.

We can get used to anything, as it turns out. The extraordinary, the phenomenal, the outrageous: these things become the new norm and so we cease to notice. Like everyone else, I went back to watching comforting propaganda on television news and reading complacent newsfeeds on my iFeed and paying attention to the American League East standings and the NBA Finals and the bestseller lists and my own

struggle to find something worth writing about. Everything was normal. Everything was fine. Everything was great.

I had started a new part-time job, Sweeping for the local digital feedwork, sending out daily Sweeps about the top personalities of the day and even, every now and then, some actual real news. The quality of the work was ludicrous, so the pay, no surprise, was outstanding. I told myself it was all very F. Scott Fitzgerald.

So it was my words that a few hundred thousand people had in their eyeseats and earsets when NASA got some cameras up there and when the Japanese and Chinese sent a joint manned mission and the ESA blew up one unmanned Ariadne on the pad and then launched another within two weeks. That was an exciting couple of months. The cameras showed us what the ships looked like: bulbous spheroids, with a wide girth amidships and one end slightly larger than the other. There was no indication of a propulsion system, no antennae or anything else on the smooth exteriors.

The Asian mission got too close and lost power, then was pushed away and found power, then approached again and lost power and got shoved away a lot harder and got the message. The ESA approached and didn't lose power and so came in closer, and closer, and then disappeared. The NASA platform sent pictures of the small unmanned Holmes explorer disappearing right through the outer hull of one of the ships just as contact was lost.

And that was it. Our various spacecraft took up station at a safe distance and watched and sensed and waited. The Ten did nothing for the longest time. I started Sweeping about Hollywood overdoses and ridiculous sports salaries. It was a living. My numbers rose into the millions and Tommy, doing real research and important work to save an entire species, just shook his head in wonder at that. I promised him that when the ridleys returned and his research paid off I'd make him famous.

And I did. I made him famous.

The Kelly

The kelly device is the squirter that gets the Shudonni around once they've paid their first visit to a place and set things up. You step into one and it disassembles, squeezes, and squirts. At the other end, another kelly unpacks and reassembles. I was told that only a few kellys exist and Twoclicks was lucky to have a couple. I was told the kellys are a remnant technology, but they never fail. I was told they are clean and quick and enormously painful. I was told you don't remember the pain.

When I swam back up to conscious thought I found I could open my eyes, but that was about it. In another minute I could move my head some, side to side. We were in the main room of a small house, the windows closed and shuttered. It looked like a shack, but that, surely, wasn't so, since it had to be utterly secure or it wouldn't hold a kelly. The warped plank walls and the tarpaper roof were certainly camouflage.

Behind me there were sounds of cracking and tearing as Heather changed. I'd seen her do that too often to want to see more. The sounds eased; there was a slight scuffing noise as she stood.

My strength was returning. I turned to look and there she was, my Earthie Heather, blonde, tall, athletic, that beautiful face, those lips that had overwhelmed my common sense a few years before and still did. She was a falsehood and I knew it all too well and somehow it didn't matter.

I was able to sit up as Heather handed me some underwear, a pair of blue jeans, a

long-sleeved blue cotton shirt, socks, and hiking boots. She started to put on similar clothing.

"How much did it hurt?" I asked her as I swung my legs over the side of the bed and started to pull on the jeans. I was thinking about the kelly.

"A lot. You screamed."

I shrugged; that explained my sore throat. I was glad I couldn't remember any of it. Then I finished getting into the clothes, not surprised to find that they fit. Heather always gets it right, as I'd discovered back when she was Tommy's intended. In those days, I used to wonder how and why.

We walked outside, a light mist swirling around us in the cold; fine droplets of rain gathering then freezing on our hair, our jeans, our shirts as we moved out onto an old wooden dock that sat on a rocky beach along the edge of a wide bend in a river. In front of us, the water swirled in a wide whirlpool before working its way out of the bend and heading downstream. I turned to look and behind us rose the sidewall of a deep gorge, disappearing into the gray fog above. The sidewall was covered in bushes and small, bare trees. A few taller oaks and maples jutted out from the wall and then angled to grow upward toward what light could reach this far into the gorge.

"Where are we?" I asked.

Heather listened to her data feed. "Niagara River," she said, "below the Falls a few miles. On the American side." She pointed upstream. "The Falls are up around that bend." She pointed the other way, "And Lake Ontario is that way, not far."

She listened again to the data feed, pointed downstream. "I'm told we'll find Tommy over there, but there's some confusion about just where." And I followed as she walked over toward the sidewall of the gorge where she found a path and we began climbing, the slippery clay making the going tricky for me in the mist and freezing rain. Heather had no trouble.

Confusion about just where? I was walking along behind her when that finally sank in. Heather, confused about where Tommy was? It wasn't possible. Heather could locate anything. She was deeply a part of the data wash that is everywhere, courtesy of our Masters of the Universe. Everyone on Earth—just like every being on each of The Seven Planets—was traceable instantly. It wasn't possible for those senses of hers to fail. Ever. But apparently they had, and I had no idea how that could happen.

It started to snow and the wind rose as we hiked up the steep gorge path. The flakes were big and heavy and in a few minutes they began to stick, slippery, to the stones and cold mud beneath our feet. I wondered what in god's name Tommy was doing here. Growing up, we'd only seen snow once or twice on visits to the grandparents and then, later, every now and again as adults. It wasn't something we missed. Tommy was a Florida boy, the kind of kid you could find knee-deep in a mangrove swamp looking for snakes and heron feathers and alligators. He loved the heat and the humidity. He loved the sunshine and the beach at low tide. He loved the thunderstorms in summer and he embraced September's hurricanes. He loved to body surf the waves that would kick up when a storm went by out to our west, heading toward the Panhandle.

Here there was none of that. Here there was nothing, I guessed, but lake-effect snow and cold summer rain. It didn't fit, not for the Tommy I'd known all my life. Not for brother Tommy, the smart one, the scientist who'd made a career out of tropical seas and beaches and endangered turtles.

We didn't get more than two hundred meters down the gravel path before Heather held up a hand to stop us and then turned to look at me. I looked at her as she shook her head, even used the heel of her palm to slap her forehead. "I'm blocked," she said in a tone of voice I'd never heard before.

"Blocked?"

"My feed is gone."

"Your feed?"

She stared at me and I saw puzzlement on her face. "My data stream, the wash, the flow. It's gone."

"And that doesn't happen often?"

"Peter, the data stream is never gone. Never."

"Except now. Here. How's that possible?"

"I don't know," she said, and that was the first time I'd ever heard her say those words about anything. And then she tapped her forehead again. She seemed to be trying to focus on something. I was wondering what this all meant when I heard the first rattle of gunfire and the leafless tree next to me seemed to come alive, its bark exploding and branches flying. For a very long second or two I didn't know what was happening. Then I saw the back of her head explode in a suddenly slowed time that allowed me to see the small bits of her hair and skin as they flew toward me, seemed to surround me, and I was turning to see her collapsing next to me as I felt a hard punch in my right shoulder blade—there was no pain at all—and then another punch, like I'd been hit by a baseball, in my lower back and then another in the back of my right knee and then something hit me hard in the back of my head and I felt just the barest fraction of anger before things got strangely quiet and I was staring up at a wet, brown leaf on a low branch above me as a single huge snowflake landed on its edge and hung there ready to drop while I watched the world get darker and then darker still and then there was nothing.

Disappointment Haunted All My Dreams

Tommy was the smart one, growing up, the one who knew the real facts about things while I was the hazy dreamer who wanted to do nothing but play sports, read books and daydream. I was into religion and was going to be a priest. He was into science. We were altar boys together for one year when I was twelve and he was ten.

There's a moment in the Catholic Mass when the priest holds the host—a little wafer of bread not much bigger than a quarter—up high with both hands and says "This is my body," and then, a bit later, "This is my blood." At that moment, Catholic belief says, the host becomes the body and blood of Christ. Not *like* the body and blood, but the actual, real thing. It's called Transubstantiation, and I'd believed it, firmly, from the time I was seven until that year when Tommy became an altar boy.

Tommy and I were kneeling on the cold marble of the altar in St. Thomas Aquinas church as the priest raised that host up high. Tommy shook his head. I saw him do that and wondered if the church walls would collapse in a great roar of godlike anger. Mom and Dad were in the front pew, watching us. They didn't notice that disbelieving shake, but I did. After Mass, he sneaked a host home and put it under the microscope so we both could peer at it. Just bread, he concluded. Then he took snips of it and ran it through his chemistry set to see what it really was.

"It's bread, Peter," he told me at the end, as he tore off a piece of that host and popped it into his mouth. I expected lightning to strike. "It's just bread, with some esters and carbonyl compounds maybe for flavor. Basically just bread," and he chewed on it.

Then he looked at me, grinning. "You can believe whatever you want to believe, Peter; it's a free country. But me? I'll take science."

That was it for him, and even then I knew better than to argue, even though, for a long while, I didn't stop believing otherwise.

The Wet of Her Embrace

I was dreaming of making love to Heather, the wet of her embrace, the urgency of her lips, when I heard arguing, whistles and clicks between two S'hudonni, the conversation much too fast for me to follow, even after a year of studying the language. Something about failure.

I came awake, the dream fading. I was naked, lying on my back on a cold, metallic table. How the hell had I gotten in here? I had no idea. My last memory was of Heather and me stepping into the kelly to be squirted to Earth so I could do what I had to do with poor Tommy. The kelly must have failed. I was lucky to be alive.

The whistles and clicks slowed, stopped, and then Heather waddled in the door on those short, thin legs. She came over to me, touched my arm. "What do you remember?"

"Everything," I said, "Tommy, the crops. We were getting squirted to Earth. Home. I remember walking into the portal right behind you. What happened?"

"Nothing, really. A minor malfunction in the kelly. We're still on S'hudon."

Later, I found out the truth about the kelly, about life and about death and originals and copies and about my own personal reality. That knowledge cost me my life. Several times.

But at that moment I believed her, having no reason yet to think otherwise.

"Was that Twoclicks you were talking to?"

She nodded, shrugged. "He wasn't all that happy with the malfunction."

"And?"

She reached down to take my hand and helped me stand. I was a little shaky for a moment or two for some reason, and she waited. I nodded and she led me off, me holding her hand and following behind, her loyal puppy, as we walked out the door, turned right, walked right back through another door and there, ominously humming, was the kelly. We stepped in.

Changes

The first time I saw Heather change, Tommy and I were waist-deep in the shallows off Egmont Key, a little island at the mouth of Tampa Bay. It was my thirty-fourth birthday and we celebrated by staring at the sea through our polarized sunglasses, hoping that a few of his Kemp's ridley turtles might come in to lay eggs. Tommy had spent eight long years working to save the Kemp's ridleys from themselves and that day, at that small island, would tell us whether he'd succeeded or not. I'd promised him fame if they came and I intended to live up to that bargain. My audience was normally about thirty million, but I'd been promoting this moment for a couple of weeks and it was close to forty million who were watching through my eyes and hearing through my ears and listening to my commentary.

For at least fifteen thousand years the Kemp's ridleys had come ashore and laid their eggs on one particular beach in a few weeks of frenzy on the Gulf Coast of Mexico north of Veracruz. It's an isolated spot and safe from most predators, though the local raccoons must certainly have had their fill of eggs once a year. When the mother ridleys arrived by the thousands each to lay up to one hundred eggs each, the overwhelming number of those eggs more than made up for a few raccoons and the enjoyment of the locals, who ate more turtle meat than normal for a few weeks a year.

Then, in 1948, a local fishing guide who'd received an eight-millimeter movie camera as a present from a rich gringo took movies of the egg-laying frenzy and the word

got out. It wasn't the eggs that people wanted so much as the mother turtles. The ridleys' meat is sweet and tender and the mothers are helpless when they lay their eggs. For the sake of turtle steak and turtle soup, the mothers died by the thousands each year. In ten years the annual arrival of the mother turtles was mostly a memory on a scratchy home movie. The Mexican government banned the harvest but years too late and the few remaining ridleys struggled for survival for three decades before Tommy Holman came along with a plan.

Tommy figured that if he could find the right beaches and the right tides and the right water and the right climate he could take the eggs from Mexico to safer beaches on an isolated barrier island in Florida. When the hatchlings emerged they'd scramble for the water and in doing that they'd imprint on the beach where Tommy had planted the seeds of their future.

On Egmont Key he planted six hundred eggs and watched, six weeks later, when the babies emerged and made their way to the water. Then he waited. Maturity and the urgent desire to mate and lay eggs takes eight years, so doctoral candidate Tommy Holman became assistant professor and then associate professor Tommy Holman before the big day came and he and I stood there waiting for the turtles to return. One returning turtle would be all right, ten would be better, one hundred would be an excellent sign, and more than that would be miraculous, the mortality of turtle hatchlings being high. Tommy had his tenure, but a few turtles showing up would, no doubt, get him the full professorship he wanted.

The ridleys did come, a few and then a dozen and then they came by unlikely hundreds. Tommy's research had panned out and I was there to see it, proud of my little brother, proud that he'd saved an entire species from certain oblivion. We were standing in calf-deep water watching the turtles come in, and Tommy was so happy that he came splashing over to me in joy and gave me a wet, triumphant high-five with his open palm before turning right around to wade back onto shore so he could watch his turtles arrive to lay their eggs.

That was the last time I ever saw him happy.

Cracking and Tearing

When I swam back up to conscious thought I could see we were in the main room of a small house, the windows closed and shuttered. It looked like a shack, but that, surely, wasn't so, since it had to be utterly secure or it wouldn't hold a kelly. The warped plank walls and the tarpaper roof were certainly camouflage.

Behind me there were sounds of cracking and tearing as Heather changed. I'd seen her do that too often to want to see more. I loved her, god knows, whether she looked like the girl I'd known in St. Pete or the waddly porpoise I knew in S'Hudson or anything else of the right weight and mass. But loving her didn't mean I had to watch the changing as it took place.

The sounds eased; there was a slight scuffling noise as she stood.

My strength was returning. I turned to look and there she was, my Earthie Heather, a tall blonde, athletic, that beautiful face, those lips that had overwhelmed me before and still did here. She was a falsehood and I knew it all too well and somehow it didn't matter.

I was able to sit up as Heather handed me some underwear, a pair of ski pants, a long-sleeved T-shirt that read "Niagara Falls" across the front, an orange and blue hooded sweatshirt, and a pair of thin gloves. She had cotton socks and high-cut shoes for me to wear, a kind of athletic shoe, padded, with a hard, plastic extra length in

the sole that extended an inch or more out in front of the toe of the shoe. She was wearing the same shoes.

"How much did it hurt?" I asked her, thinking about the kelly.

She smiled. "Quite a bit, I think. You were screaming as you formed up." I shrugged; that explained my sore throat. Then I got into the clothes, not surprised to find that they fit. Heather always gets it right.

The shoes felt better than I'd thought they would. We opened the door to walk outside and it was snowing hard, a foot of the stuff on the ground already and more coming hard to add to it. It would be a difficult slog, walking through this mess.

But we weren't walking. There was a rattle from behind me and Heather came through the door carrying two pair of skis and poles. The skis were long and narrow. She set two of them down in front of me. "Step into them like this," she said, and showed me how the front edge of the shoes snapped into the bindings, leaving the heel free.

"Cross country," I've said. "I've never done this."

"It's easy. If you can walk, you can cross-country ski, Peter. Trust me."

I did trust her. Mostly. I clipped into the bindings. "We'll go slow, right?"

"Absolutely. It's not complicated, Peter. No sweat."

She'd lied about that last part. There was, in fact, a lot of sweat as we pushed down a narrow trail that edged along the riverbank. Heather went first. Her skis were shorter and wider, meant to cut tracks in the new snow, and so I followed in her trail. We were in a deep gorge, with a cliff wall rising up to our right just a dozen yards away or so and a swift river to our left another dozen yards away. Part of the path went up, climbing the side wall of the gorge. We stayed on the other, smoother, part that wound through the trees. It must have been a hiking trail in older, better days. It was all very scenic, I'm sure, but I was so busy trying to stay upright as I kept up with Heather that I barely had time—or energy—to notice anything to either side. Instead, I focused on keeping my skis inside the grooves she cut into the snow with hers. When I stayed there, I did fine. When I let my skis slip out of the grooves she'd cut, I slid or, twice, fell. It was no damn fun at all.

But we made progress for a good half hour, staying down in the river gorge, sliding along toward wherever we were going. Twice Heather stopped and seemed to take her bearings, though I couldn't see any option other than straight ahead or straight back. Then, a third time, she stopped and tapped the side of her head. I stood behind her, breathing hard, my breath a cloud of wet vapor in the cold air, the steam rising from me as I slowly cooled down a bit.

She tapped her head again, nodded to herself, turned around to face me. "Out of the skis, Peter, quickly."

She used the sharp end of her poles to hit a button and step out of her skis while I fumbled to do the same. Seconds later she was next to me, using her pole to press down hard on the release of my right ski and then my left. I stepped out and then nearly fell as she tugged me into the foliage to the side of the trail.

"Down," she hissed at me, "and be quiet."

I knelt. And shut up.

Heather reached into a pocket in her ski pants and pulled out a small device the size of a deck of cards. This was a remarkable act, since as far as I knew all her electronics were deeply internal and constantly upgraded. I couldn't imagine a use for an external, but there it was.

She looked at the screen on the device and frowned. "Nothing," she said. "No energy, no metal, a few mammals. Damn." And she tapped the screen and then reached up to tap her head.

She turned to stare at me. "Your brother has better equipment than I thought,

Peter. He's out there, maybe with some friends, but I can't read any signatures, even with this external."

"You're sure it's him? How would he know we're coming?"

She shook her head and smiled at the same time. "Oh, Peter," she said and was about to explain things to me when I heard a kind of blowing noise, a slight rushing of wind, and an arrow appeared, buried deep into that beautiful neck, the shaft vibrating as she fell back into the snow, gasping and gurgling as blood began to spurt from the wound.

I was reaching out to her when I heard another blowing noise and then felt something punch me in my lower back, and then in the left arm. I turned to look and felt another in my chest and thought I might take a look at that to see what the hell was going on but then it was getting curiously dark out and then there was nothing.

Deep Water

After Dad's death Mom faded away from us. Tommy and I knew how hard it would be for her, not just the moving on without Dad, but also the memory of those final ghastly moments, struggling with the belt, struggling in the warm water of Tampa Bay. Struggling. And failing.

She couldn't talk about it, no surprise, and we didn't push her, thinking it would all come out when it was time. The psychologist urged patience on us and, slowly, the quiet became the norm. We didn't ask and Mom didn't tell.

She took an indefinite leave from the law firm and then hibernated, insisting on staying in the old family home. We thought she might want to put the place on the market and move into something smaller, something with fewer memories, but she refused to even consider that. Instead, she mostly sat in the same living room where she'd spent her adult life with Dad, sitting there on her couch and reading, and waiting.

Tommy would visit with her on Mondays and I did Fridays every week. She had her friends, too, who came by often. We wanted to find that difficult balance between not enough and too much for her, but it was hard to tell how we were doing at it. The strong, vital woman she'd been was gone. This new, more frail version of her was opaque to us. Was she fine? Was she tired? Was she interested in whatever we offered? It was hard to tell. This went on for months.

And then, one Friday in the winter, some seven months after Dad's death, I found her packing. She and a friend, she said, were going on a cruise, a four-night Caribbean jaunt out of Port of Tampa: a day at sea, a day in Grand Cayman, another in Cozumel, and then back to Tampa.

To me, and to Tommy, that sounded perfect. Safe, calm, confined, scenic. Lots of fresh air and sunshine. It might revive her, it might help bring back the mother we both remembered.

There was no friend with her, we found out later. And her clothes weren't unpacked in her stateroom. All we know is that as the good ship *Scenic Seas* passed under the Sunshine Skyway on its way out of Tampa Bay and into the wide open Gulf of Mexico, Annette Holman, age fifty-nine, climbed over the side railing and dived toward the warm embrace some seventy feet below her. She never surfaced and the ship's tenders, the Coast Guard cutter, the big Coast Guard helicopter, the Tampa police boat, the half-dozen fishermen in their boats not far away: they all converged and ultimately, an hour too late, found her.

We buried her right next to Dad. Tommy blamed me for her death. Not enough attention, too much attention, didn't see the signs, let her go so easily, didn't check on

that friend, didn't ask the psychologist about it, didn't do this or did do that or should have should have should have.

I didn't argue, and eventually he calmed down and we papered things over and got on with our lives.

The Ships

The ships showed up at about the same time that Tommy and I had started to patch things up. He was at the university's department of marine science and I was a successful freelancer, making a living off adjunct teaching at the local college campus while I wrote sports and entertainment profile books ("Johnny Harvest, MVP: as told to Peter Holman") and joined the newest social media fad, Sweeping, where some cam-glasses turned me into a camera crew as I chatted with celebrities and jocks. At first, it was a living, the books doing pretty well and the Sweeping helped me promote the Peter Holman brand name.

Meanwhile, the ships kept watch over us, sometimes changing formations for reasons we couldn't begin to divine, but usually just Up There. Orbiting. Normal.

Sweeping got competitive quickly, though the equipment was pricey and, before long, some of the most daring Sweepers were getting the cams as implants and WebSweeping anonymously. It did tend to make one nervous, never knowing for sure if the girl you were chatting up at the bar had one eye doing double-duty so everything you said to her was reaching an unintended audience. Me? As a matter of ethics I kept wearing the glasses and even kept the tiny glowlight that let you know I was Sweeping.

At first, I just Sweeped my work, so the interviews I was doing for the books and some webzines could be watched live or from the recordings. Then I started using it to Sweep myself before and after the interviews as I chatted with myself about the personality and merit of the interview. Then, within a few weeks, I left it on during some parties and other social occasions and things started to get busier.

For the first month I hadn't been getting much out of the Sweep thing: you couldn't sell ads if you had just a few thousand viewers. But then, when I start getting personal with it, my numbers began to rise into the tens of thousands and then the hundreds of thousands and then, one January day, over the one million mark. I figured my natural talent was reeling them in.

Tommy and I hung out some when we could and for those times, of course, the Sweep was off. Tommy seemed settled and less angry. After Mom died we'd each received a half-million dollars from our parents' will and our father's life insurance. We both put most of that into real estate. Tommy had a nice house down at the south end of town, overlooking the bay and with the Skyway Bridge arching across in the distance. He liked to sit out on his dock at night, smoke his cigarettes, and look at the water and the stars and the distant lights of that bridge.

My own place was a nice twelfth-floor condo right downtown, with an impressive view of the city's waterfront and, in the distance, the lights of Tampa ten miles away across that part of the bay. The women I brought home were always impressed with that view.

He called me at work one day, said he had a surprise to show me and asked me to bring someone along and come to his place for a classic Florida dinner—grouper out on the grill, some sweet corn in the boiler, a few Ybor Gold beers, some Buffett on the sound system. That sounded pretty good to me, and Danni, my current friend, would like it just fine. I didn't kid myself that we had a future, Danni and I, but she was a joy to look at, didn't have any Sweep implants I had to worry about, and was per-

fectly good in the sack. I'd learned the hard way that that was all I should expect.

We got there about seven, and Tommy was grinning as he opened the door. Behind him, standing shyly, was Heather.

She was plain enough. Short, straight blonde hair framed a round, pleasant face with dark eyebrows, brown eyes, no lipstick, thin lips, a nice smile. She folded her arms a lot, was a little stoop-shouldered and meek, but must have looked wonderful to Tommy, who stood proudly next to her.

"Pete, this is Heather," Tommy said, and put his arm around her as he brought her forward.

I wondered, shaking her hand and saying hello, how long Tommy had known her, since they were acting like a couple that had been together for a while. As we headed through the house and out to the back porch and that nice view of the Skyway, she made her way to the kitchen for drinks, acting at home, comfortable, like she knew her way around.

Tommy might as well have read my mind. He followed out right behind me as we walked onto the wooden decking that edged out from the screened porch. He lit a Camel, blew out a cloud of contentment. "We've been seeing each other for a week, Petey. Can you believe it?"

"No," I answered truthfully.

He laughed. "It's like I've known her all my life. I didn't know it could be like that."

"True love, you mean?"

"Hell, I guess so." He shrugged his shoulders, took another pull on the cigarette. "What else would you call it? It's like we're perfectly made for each other. Fate, I guess."

"Am I hearing you right, Mr. Scientist? Fate? You were *meant* for each other?"

He laughed. "It's really something, huh?"

"Yeah," I said, "it's really something."

Later, when Tommy came out on the deck to explain to Danni about how that Skyway Bridge was the longest concrete suspension bridge in the cosmos, I wandered back inside and sat down next to Heather. She looked at me and smiled.

"So you're the famous writer and Sweeper," she said. "Tommy talks about you all the time. He says you're very good at what you do."

"He's too generous," I said, though the truth was that I was proud of the fact that Tommy had copies of all five of my books on display. I didn't think he even knew what Sweeping was.

"No, he's not. I read one of your books last night, the one on the quarterback with the autistic child. It's very good. You're honest but fair, and that's hard to do."

"Thanks."

"And I've started tuning in to your Sweep. It's good, too. That's a whole different sort of editing and writing skill involved, but you seem to have a gift for it. And, of course, while it's deeply personal, it, too, seems to be honest and fair."

"Maybe," I said, smiling, "or at least sometimes."

She laughed. "The way you Sweep on just about everything, girls like Danni must worry about hanging around with you."

"Girls like Danni are hoping I'll say something about them. Anything."

"I wonder, are you going to Sweep about me? Should I be careful about what I say?"

"Yep, I probably will. If I were you I wouldn't talk to me at all." I almost wasn't kidding, since I was feeling a kind of vibe from her that I liked. And yet she was my brother's new girlfriend.

She smiled "I guess I'll just have to be very careful, then. In more ways than one, actually."

I laughed, maybe a little nervously.

"What a strange thing it is to be the kind of writer that you are. I've wondered

about that, about what it's like, making a living off the lives of others."

I shook my head. "It's not about the money. I think of it as finding out the truth about things. I'd like to think I'd do it for free."

"You love it that much?"

"Yes, I do," I said, but I was thinking as I said it that I wouldn't have answered that way a few months back, when not many people were viewing my Sweeps. Now that there were millions, I'd found a new affinity for Sweeping.

"And you think telling the truth is that important?"

"Yes, very. Plus, it's all I know how to do. That's all there is. Hell, it's who I am." And as I said that I realized I was contradicting myself. Lying. Ah, well.

She laughed at me. "Mr. Truthfinder? Well, it's been working for you, I'll admit that. I see this week that your numbers are up again, nearly two million now. How's that feel, that kind of success?"

I shrugged my shoulders. Maybe gave her a little smile.

"You know," she said, "my guess is that what you really want is the biggest audience you can find."

I laughed it off, but she stared at me, dead serious for the moment. "Here's my prediction, Peter. You and your brother are a lot more alike than either of you know, and you both want success. Tommy's going to find it with his turtles—he's going to make it work, you know. He's going to save that whole species. He'll pay any price he has to for that to happen.

"And you. Someday very soon the right story will come along and you'll realize the price of telling the whole world the truth is worth all the risk and you'll go for it, too. Bingo, you'll be a Big Star. Capital 'B' and 'S.'"

"Well," I said, "'B' and 'S', for sure, anyway."

She was still staring at me: those eyes, those eyes. "You'll get a chance to go global, and you'll take it. And Tommy, he'll get his chance, too." She raised her glass to me. "And you know what else? Both of you will find out that some things are worth almost any price."

I was going to shake my head no, but I didn't. I just looked right back into those eyes and felt something I couldn't quite place.

She broke the spell with a chuckle, and looked away. "Well, I guess we'll see then, won't we? The turtles, Tommy says, are supposed to come back to nest this summer and that will be his time."

"And me? When's my time coming?"

She laughed again. I liked that laugh. She put her fingertips on her temples, acting the mystic. "I sense it coming soon. Fame. Fortune. Difficult decisions."

I smiled and shook my head. I meant to ask her then what she did for a living, and why she was in St. Pete. But Tommy and Danni came in to get out of the humidity and we all wound up talking about the Rays, who were on a winning streak. I kept looking at Heather as the evening wore on. She was all subtleties with her looks, I decided, in contrast to her conversation, where she seemed to delight in saying exactly what was on her mind. Tommy seemed to find that charming.

Later, at my place, when I made love to Danni I was thinking about Heather. Some women, the ones like Danni, the more you get to know them the less attractive they are. There's something about their personality that begins to affect their looks, or at least how you see those looks. With Danni and her easy acquiescence, it took me a week or two to start to think her nose was too small for the broad features of her face, or that her lips needed all that careful attention she gave them because, really, they were thin and hard. Things like that started adding up, as they always do.

With Heather, it was just the opposite. The more I saw of her as the days went by, the better she looked to me. I had to work to remember that I'd found her plain at

first. She wore almost no make-up, and didn't seem to care about her looks in general. But every time I'd be at Tommy's or he would bring her by my place over the next few weeks, I'd find myself seeing, as if for the first time, how perfect her body was, or how natural and beautiful that face, how full and inviting were those lips. I watched her walk, watched her talk, watched how she moved around, marveled at how her face came alive when she cared about something—and she cared about a lot: politics, the environment—and she had ideas on how to fix them all.

And I watched her as she watched me. Little smiles. Little messages in those blue eyes, those full lips as they slightly parted. Eventually, that all got the better of me.

We never got a chance to talk our way out of it, talk about how it was happening between us, before it all got so crazy. As far as Tommy knew, one day she was there for him and the next day she was gone. All she left behind was a polite little note saying goodbye. And right about then the Ships arrived and the whole world got a little crazy. Everything, in fact, got a little crazy.

Earthie Forms

I was dreaming of making love to Heather in her Earthie form. She was on top, looking down at me as she rose and fell, smiling at me, eyes half closed, murmuring something in the sibilant clicks and whistles of S'hudon, a message I could almost understand, was just about to understand, was nearly there in several ways, in fact, when the dream slipped away and I was flat on my back on a cold slab and the clicks and whistles were very loud and insistent and right next to me. I turned to look and it was Heather in her S'hudonni form, engaged in a heated discussion with Twoclicks, their faces close together as they argued.

Twoclicks was not happy. I sat up, wondering how I'd gotten here. My last memory was of stepping into the kelly to be squirted to Earth so I could do what I had to do with poor Tommy. The kelly must have failed. I was lucky to be alive.

The whistles and clicks slowed, stopped, and then Twoclicks looked at me for long seconds with that inscrutable face of his before he turned and waddled away.

Heather came over and stood in front of me. "What do you remember?"

"Everything," I said, "Tommy, the crops. We were getting squirted to Earth. I remember walking into the portal right behind you. What happened?"

Heather gave me a necessary lie. "A malfunction. Something wrong in the data stream. I couldn't figure it out or fix it, so we're still on S'hudon."

"That's what Twoclicks was yelling at you about?"

She nodded. "He's not very happy with me at the moment."

"And?"

"And he's sending someone along to help me with the stream, someone with special equipment." She wasn't pleased.

The door at the far end of the room slid open with a sigh and I could hear a quick pad pad pad as someone came our way. I knew that sound; only one of the S'hudonni I knew walked like that, with small quick happy-feet steps.

He rounded the corner and came in the door. It was chubby little Treble, Twoclicks' son and my favorite of all the various princelings. "Hey, Peter!" he yelled to me, and came hurrying over for a quick hug. "I get to go! I get to go!" The folds of excess flesh on his belly were jiggling.

I hugged him back. I liked the kid. And his English was really getting very good, I thought.

Heather shook her head, looked at me and smiled, and then, resigned to taking the

princeling along, she reached out to take his hand and turned to head out the door and down the hallway to the room where the kelly waited for us.

I stood there for a few seconds. Obviously there were a lot of things going on that I didn't understand. Wheels within wheels, in typical S'hudonni fashion. But it wasn't as if I had any choice. Nowhere to go but forward, I told myself, and so I came along behind my two companions. Off we go into the wild blue marble.

I reached the kelly room and walked in to see Heather and Treble inside the framework, starting to lie back down onto their transfer beds. I'd been told the transfer process was a painful one, but that I wouldn't remember it. I'd lie down, I'd slip away into oblivion, and then I'd wake up. On Earth. Ready to go talk with my brother Tommy.

And I was supposed to stop him. Well, okay, how bad could it be if Twoclicks was sending his one son along to help? A walk in the park, I hoped. No big deal. I lay back onto the warm transfer bed. There was a slight hum and I was suddenly very tired. I closed my eyes.

Energetic

It was past midnight when I pulled into Tommy's driveway. I'd been at a reading at the Miami Book Fair, four long hours' drive away from St. Pete. Chapter Four of my book on quarterback Daniel Davies and his autistic son had been reprinted in an anthology of essays on children with special needs and I'd been invited to read my piece to a crowd at the book fair. I'd enjoyed it. It wasn't the couple of million or so reading my Sweep, but it was nice actually see my audience, and know they could read, and that they seemed to like what I'd written.

I had a text message from Tommy asking me to stop in and say hi on my way home. I'd replied that I would and then my cell phone ran out of battery and I hadn't thought to bring along the charger that worked from the car.

Tommy wasn't there. Heather opened the front door before I got to it. She was wearing blue jeans, a short-sleeved blouse, no bra. Her hair, longer, I realized, than I'd thought, was pulled back into a ponytail.

"We figured your phone was off," she said. "Tommy texted you. He got a call that there's a leatherback nesting over on Longboat and two Kemp's ridleys nesting down on Marco Island. He doesn't think they're really Kemp's, but he has to check those out. He said he'd be back tomorrow around noon."

Heather had been spending most nights at his place for a few weeks by then. There'd been rumblings from Tommy about asking her to marry him. I'd told him I thought it was a great idea. I'd told him she was smart and nice looking and seemed in love with him and what more could you possibly ask than that?

I stood there and took it all in for a moment. She smelled like the energy in the air right before a summer downpour. I looked at her and she looked back, not saying anything. She smiled, leaned up a bit and kissed me. Those lips, full, soft. My brother's girl, the one he was talking about marrying.

We went very slowly. She didn't say a thing at first, stepping back so I could undo those buttons, one by one, from top down to bottom. Then I reached up inside the blouse to push it back off her shoulders as she let it slip to the floor.

I'd never seen her breasts before, though god knows I'd fantasized about them. They were round and firm and perfect, the areolas a thin dark band around the deep red of the nipples. I stared at them.

"They're yours, Peter. I've wanted you to see them. Kiss them for me, please."

I did. Later, after, in bed, I did again, kissing those breasts, her lips, her belly, and

then entering her one more time while she brought me to her, the electricity crackling as if for the first time.

We fit together. It was perfection. I didn't want it to be, but there it was. Making love to her, making love with her, was the best thing I'd ever done, the only true poem I'd ever written, the best truth I'd ever discovered, a weird and welcome transcendence from what I'd thought, with so many women, was love.

But there was Tommy to think of. Jesus, there'd be hell to pay. I wondered if that's what she'd been getting at that first night we met when she talked about paying the price. Had she known then that we'd wind up in bed, in love?

Was I in love? I sure thought so. One of the things I'd finally learned after a hundred girlfriends was that great sex and True Love aren't even in the same neighborhood. And this was so different, so not-what-I'd-known, that I had to think it was something real. Looking back, I can see that at the time I was so full of myself that I never got around to wondering if Heather felt the same way. I assumed she did, but never asked and she never offered.

So, finally, burdened and torn between these truths, my head whirling over what we'd done, I left. Went home to my own house. Climbed into bed but couldn't sleep. Got back up, slipped into shorts and a T-shirt and sat on the couch, waiting for the phone to ring or for the pounding on the front door from Tommy's hurt and angry fists. Finally, around seven A.M., the phone jangled. I picked it up.

"Hello."

"Petey." He sounded so terribly hurt.

"Yeah, Tom."

"Pete. She's gone. Heather's gone."

"Gone?"

"There's a note here. She loves me, but she has to leave. She's gone."

And that was that. As the weeks went by Tommy seemed to get used to it. Some more leatherbacks and a few scattered Kemp's ridleys helped him with that. Me? I couldn't believe, at first, that she'd chosen that path, but eventually you have to face the facts. And maybe, I thought, she'd done the right thing for us both. With her gone, I never told Tommy what had happened. If she'd been around, all that would have gone differently.

A Quantum Hiss

I opened my eyes and tried to focus. It took a few seconds before the ceiling came into view: rough-cut wood slats set into place. To the right an open space. We were in some kind of wooden shack. How could that be secure enough to hold a kelly device? If we were on Earth like we were supposed to be, then the kelly would be proscribed technology and completely secure, wouldn't it?

Another half-minute passed and I could turn my head some side to side. We were in the main room of what seemed to be a hunting cabin or shack, the windows closed and shuttered. The warped plank walls and the tarpaper roof were certainly camouflage.

Behind me I began to hear the uncomfortable sounds of Heather changing: cartilage and muscle and skin and bones all breaking and snapping at once. I'd seen her do that too often to want to see it again. I waited and the sounds died down.

There was a slight scuffling noise as she stood. I heard the door to the shack opening, too, and looked that way. Treble walked in, almost bouncing along on those spindly little legs, happy as he could be.

"Peter!" he said when he saw me looking. He ran over and stood next to me. "How do you feel?"

"Yes, Peter, how do you feel?" It was Heather, my Earthie Heather, walking into view. "You should be getting stronger very rapidly now."

My strength *was* returning. "I feel good, guys, thanks," I said as I sat up and, a little cautiously, swung my legs over the side. Heather reached out to take my right hand and steady me, and little Treble came over to take my left.

Heather was a blonde, and tall, athletic. Her face, angular with a firm jaw, was absolutely achingly beautiful in a way that I still found unnerving. When she first explained to me how that face came to be I should have been dismayed, but wasn't. She was a falsehood and I knew it and it had never mattered.

Treble whistled his excitement and Heather whistled back as I stood up. I felt better, a whole lot better, my nanos kicking in.

Heather let go, so that only Treble held hands with me. On a bench at the far side of the room was a small stack of clothing. Heather grabbed a few things and returned, handing me some underwear, a pair of ski pants, some insulated gloves, a long-sleeved T-shirt and a hooded sweatshirt, socks, and a pair of low-cut boots with odd soles that had an inch of material coming out the front of the shoe. She handed Treble some other clothes and then began putting on her own clothes, an outfit like mine. Treble slipped into a brown coverall complete with a hood over his head so that he looked like a tiny monk: Brother Treble from S'hudon ready to meet the aborigines of this strange planet.

I finished getting into the clothes, not surprised to find that they fit. Heather always gets it right, as I'd discovered back when she was Tommy's intended. In those days, I used to wonder how and why.

We finished dressing, each of us, and then walked to the front door of the shack. There were two pairs of skis and poles there and a small sled with a seat on it and a front harness attached to it.

The weather on S'hudon—at least the part where I lived—is generally damp and cool. I hadn't seen more than a light snow flurry in my time there, and I'd lived mostly in Florida before my sojourn to S'hudon, so I was a long way from being an Alpine skier.

"I take it there's snow outside?" I said to Heather and Treble as we reached the door, "and I'm supposed to know how to ski?"

Heather smiled at me. "These are cross-country skis, Peter. If you can walk you can ski in them. It's easy. It's even kind of fun."

"Sure," I said. "It's fun."

Heather spent five minutes getting us ready, showing me how that front edge of my boot clipped into the ski binding, leaving the heel free. Then she gave me a thirty-second lesson in cross-country skiing. Use the poles for balance, slide the right ski forward while pushing with the left pole. Repeat with the other ski and pole. Voila, you're a skier.

When she pronounced me ready we all grabbed one piece of equipment or another and she opened the door.

It was my first time home since the day I'd walked into a screamship and headed for S'hudon two years before. The kelly machines took enormous power to work and there weren't very many of them, I'd been told, so their use was rare. For most travelers, voyage by screamship was how it was done.

I remembered leaving Earth in the middle of a torrential thunderstorm in coastal Florida, lightning flashing all around as Heather, Twoclicks, and I walked across the wide sand of the beach at Rum Point and then up the ramp and into the ship. That first trip from Earth to S'hudon took two weeks and I'd thought I might be leaving forever. Now, in a heartbeat, I was back.

Wherever we were now was a very different place. A bright one, for one thing. A low winter sun in a cloudless sky glared off the ice and snow. It took a few seconds for my nanoed eyes to adjust and then a frozen Earth came into view. We were in a deep river gorge, standing on a wide shoreline that edged along between a towering rock wall behind us and the river in front. The shoreline was bouldered and wooded and a couple of hundred meters wide. The river was in a hurry, water rushing over rapids just visible upstream. There was no ice in the river. Thick woods ran deep along both sides of us on our shoreline and more woods across the river. Those woods ended at another steep rock wall that rose to form that side of the gorge. The gorge was a couple of hundred meters deep and I thought I saw houses along the top of the far side. I turned to look behind me and on this side the top of the gorge overwhelmed the view: the rock ended abruptly and then there was blue sky.

We stood in a clearing with the shack just behind us, the rock wall behind that, woods to both sides. A path wound its way out of the woods to the left, weaved through the boulders to pass near where we stood and then weaved away again through the boulders to the right and on into the woods.

"That way," said Heather and pointed toward the right as she stepped into her bindings and took the harness onto her shoulders. She started skiing and the sled came along behind her, Treble sitting upright in the contraption looking very happy about it. I stepped into my bindings and followed along behind. The snow was a foot deep, but Heather cut right through it and the sled's runners fit perfectly into the twin grooves she cut into the snow. I kept my skis in the same ruts as I followed along. In five minutes we'd made it to the edge of the clearing and into the woods. We headed downriver, the tumbling water to our left as we slid along. I had some questions—a lot of questions, in fact—but Heather was in a hurry to get us somewhere and I couldn't hold to the pace she was setting and talk at the same time, so I shut up and skied.

The temperature was below freezing, with icicles hanging from the lower branches of the trees that overhung the river to our left and the snow glaring in the sunshine. There was a light breeze in our face and for the first few minutes I enjoyed the skiing. I discovered the trick was to slide the feet forward rather than step, and I discovered, too, that staying warm wasn't a problem when one is cross-country skiing. As soon as we were in the woods and out of the breeze, in fact, I could feel the sweat break out on my face.

By that time Heather and little Treble were thirty meters ahead of me and so I tried to quicken the pace, which turned out to be a mistake. There was a fallen branch in the path, and while it was covered with as much snow as the rest of the trail it still meant I had to either stop, turn sideways and carefully step over the branch, or go ahead and try to ski right over it. Heather's tracks made it clear she'd gone right over it, and so I tried to ski it, too. I fell.

Cross-country skis don't have quick-release bindings, so when one falls, one ends up in a tangle of skis, poles, arms, and legs. And, in my case, some pain.

Pain is more interesting than you perhaps know. Sometimes it's real, sometimes it's phantom pain that your brain—confused by amputation or other systemic shock—invents for you as it tries to cope. Sometimes there's more pain than the injury should be producing as the brain amplifies the signal. Sometimes there's no pain at all even when the signals are being sent; the brain simply chooses to ignore them.

In my case, I hadn't felt any pain in a couple of years. The knee surgeries and the battered right ankle that were reminders of my time spent playing basketball and which used to ache pretty much constantly before I met up with Twoclicks and was brought to S'hudon, had been injected with nanos that did their work admirably. Since the day I'd had the nanos introduced I'd nearly forgotten what it was like to not feel good, and so as I lay there in the snow and wondered whether my ankle was

sprained or broken I marveled at the pain—electric jabs of it that shot up from my ankle through my calf, along with a nauseating deep ache that was centered just above the ankle.

I tried to move my body around enough that I could reach down and touch the ankle, as if that would help somehow; but the movement sent more sharp jabs up through the calf. I decided that I needed to lie there for another few minutes and rest, thinking surely Heather would come back for me soon.

And then I realized the implications of the pain. What the hell had happened to my nanos? They should have instantly dampened the pain and started the healing process. I'd twisted ankles during my daily jogs a few times on Shudon and the pain of that had lasted for seconds, no more.

I heard the sound of boots crunching through the snowy underbrush behind me and well off the path. I managed to turn my head up enough to look—wondering why Heather was off the path and off her skis—and there was my brother Tommy, walking toward me, stepping through the snow to stand over me and shake his head and say, in that same tone of voice he used the very day I left Earth: "You always were clumsy, Peter."

Egmont Key

On that day at Egmont Key, I stood there in the waist-deep water and Swepted like crazy the scene as turtles by the hundreds, by the thousands, swam past me, bumping my legs and then moving on, driven to lay those eggs and ignoring anything that lay in their way. Tommy would be famous, I thought. All those years of work had paid off.

I looked for him. He'd been next to me for a while and then he left to move toward the beach so he could video the mothers arriving and digging. I stayed in the water and did a Sweep of him heading into the beach. It was astounding footage, watching him wade through a thick throng of turtles all heading to shore with him. You could see their plate-sized shells all scrambling along in a hurry, bumping up against each other and him as the turtles fought to reach the shore, find a patch of sand, scratch a deep hole and then deposit one hundred eggs or more. I zoomed in, I pulled back, I panned, I came in tight. Every shot was better than the last.

Tommy, I was sure, would be a global household name within a day. I was happy for him, happy to have a small part in making it happen.

And then there came my way a shape, sharklike, a shadow in the water. Near it, another shadow, thicker, surfacing and then down again rolling in the warm sea, a porpoise, I guessed. Around these two visitors there were ridleys everywhere by the hundreds, serving-plate-sized little sea turtles, swimming hard, driven by the need to lay those eggs on the beach just a few dozen yards away from where Tommy stood, triumphant.

The shark form circled and then came to a stop, the thicker porpoise next to it. They were dead still in the water as the ridleys swam on by. And then the porpoise sank at the rear end and I could see in the clear Gulf water that there were short legs and it planted them and stood, rising from the water to stare at me, nictitating membranes blinking in the sun. This was how I met Twoclicks.

The shark was blurring and there were terrible changes taking place there in the water. I could hear tearing and cracking sounds as cartilage and bone and skin suffered and altered and then the shark-shape, no longer anything like a shark at all, of course, stood on its own gorgeous legs and it was Heather rising from the water to

brush back her wet hair and smile at me. I knew her well. Much too well, and I was ashamed of our history; but then she smiled and shook her blond hair out a bit and said "Hello, Peter. I'm back," and I was, once again, lost.

Tangled Up

"Let's see what we can do to get you out of that tangle, Peter," Tommy said, kneeling down beside me and working on the bindings to my skis.

In a few seconds he had clicked open the bindings and, very gently, pulled the skis and poles away from where I lay there. Then he helped me sit up.

As he pulled me up, I looked around and Heather and Treble were nowhere to be seen. I hadn't thought they were that far ahead, and in any case Heather's senses are remarkable: hearing, eyesight, touch, taste, smell, all are enhanced dramatically. She is a construct, after all, a mechanical woman; and she had demonstrated to me emphatically any number of times that her creator had endowed her with inalienable rights that were blindingly superior to yours and mine.

And yet she wasn't here.

"We'll meet up with Heather and that little prince in a bit, Peter, don't you worry," said Tommy, smiling. "And this time we'll keep you all alive for a while, too."

This time? I didn't know what he meant by that.

I also didn't know what the hell had happened to Tommy. I took my first good look at him and couldn't believe what I was seeing. He was on snowshoes, dressed in jeans and a ski jacket with a pea cap on his head. He leaned on a staff for support, standing crookedly as if he might fall right over without that staff for support.

His clothing hung on him loosely, his face gray with illness. He looked like he was dying, and yet I knew that couldn't be so. I'd made a deal with Twoclicks more than a year ago that I'd trail along to S'hudon, a polite Earthie pet to entertain Twoclicks and his aristocratic friends. I'd send my Sweep home and keep the Earthies entertained. I'd take notes and write a book. I'd play nice. I'd willingly suspend my disbelief about Heather and make love with her in the most public of ways while S'hudon and the six worlds of The Seven other than Earth watched and commented. That was the insanity that was my life on S'hudon.

And in return my nanos kept me healthy and what I saw and what I said and what I heard were being watched and heard back home. By hundreds of millions, Heather told me. On a good day, when something as exciting as the hunt with Twoclicks and his siblings occurred, nearly a billion.

And there was this:

One month to the day after Twoclicks and Heather showed up at the beach, we were all out on the Gulf, the four of us, beyond sight of land where Twoclicks could swim in the warm Gulf in peace, while we three watched. He had dampened his nanos so the screens were down. He wanted to feel the water, breathe the air, revel in the warmth without protection. He liked the sense of danger, knowing, always, that in seconds he could re-engage and that, always, Heather was there to protect him.

Tommy, watching from the aft deck of *Serapis*, wasn't saying much. He looked tired. It had been a difficult month for him. First, the realization that somehow—he couldn't figure out how, but it had to be true—Twoclicks and Heather had brought those hundreds of turtles to that beach. No test could prove that was so: Tommy and his colleagues had done everything they could to analyze the turtles and their eggs and couldn't find anything. But Tommy knew, he knew.

And in that knowing he knew more. These first tentative appearances by the S'hudonni had been made—Twoclicks in Florida, Whistle in Toronto, Octave in Paris. They said they were curious, that was all. And then, a week later, that they had seen some areas where they might help us. And then, a week later, they voiced a certain insistence on helping.

And so it went, and Tommy knew what it meant. Science. Our science. Our understanding of Things As They Are and our efforts to understand more: all that was gone. We knew, essentially, nothing. As Yeats once said: All had changed, changed utterly. And yes, a terrible beauty was born.

Tommy told me, a few days before we agreed to take Twoclicks and Heather out on the *Serapis*, that he felt like he'd been thrown back to the Stone Age. Everything he knew was obsolete. Science itself was obsolete. The S'hudonni knew everything, could go anywhere, could do anything.

If, of course, they wanted to. And that turned out to be a very large "if," as we came to realize.

But all that was yet to come. For now, I joined Tommy on the aft deck while *Serapis* lay at anchor over the Boca Banks, the water just twenty feet deep though we were ten miles out.

We watched Twoclicks swimming, those small arms folded back, that stubby body suddenly looking suited to its environment as he sped by, then surfaced and looked our way, then went back underwater and sped away at a pace that was astonishing. He so obviously belonged in that medium; all the clumsiness we saw in him when he walked on land was gone.

Tommy lit up a Camel, blew out the smoke, looked out toward Twoclicks as he said quietly, "You do know I hate these sons-of-bitches, right?"

"They're just a few hundred years ahead of us, Tommy, that's all. And they happened to come now, and happened to find you and me."

"You think it's all coincidence, Petey?" He took another drag, then flicked the cigarette out into the water. "You think they came and just stumbled onto you and me? That seems pretty damn unlikely to me."

I shrugged my shoulders. "Lots of things look unlikely if you think of them that way, Tommy. I think they were looking for some people, some humans, to do certain things for them and we just happened to be in the right place at the right time."

"Yeah, right place, right time," he said. He nodded toward Heather, who was up on the flying deck keeping an eye on Twoclicks' cavorting. "And what about her? God, I thought I loved her."

"Yeah," I admitted, "that's a puzzle, why she did what she did." Then I jabbed him in the shoulder, "But, hey pal, you never could figure out women."

He didn't laugh.

We heard a distant rumble, deep, the throaty growl of a cigarette boat. In those days the shock of the Arribada had worn off and the big changes hadn't started yet, so life for most people was going on as it always had. Your typical American doesn't know much about science, or care. As long as the car starts, the wireless and cell phones work, the planes fly, the stores are open, the bars sell beer: everything seems fine.

That was *Tempest* headed our way, the big cigarette boat of the Jensen brothers, a couple of bubbas that we'd known since childhood, when they'd been the high school bullies. These days, they lived on a barrier island in some luxury and with a very fast boat, but with no discernible source of income. You figure it out.

I nodded toward *Tempest* and the brothers. "Coming back in from a pickup, you think?"

Tommy lit another Camel. "In broad daylight? I doubt it."

"So they're just out for a little fishing?" But I didn't see any poles and *Tempest* wasn't rigged for fishing. They were a few hundred meters away, but I thought I saw the Jensens standing on deck together, looking our way, maybe pointing.

There was a puff of smoke from where they stood, and then, a half-second later, a sharp crack of sound. They were shooting at us. No, they were shooting at Twoclicks; I heard more shots fired and saw the splash where the bullets were hitting the water all around Twoclicks.

Tommy saw all this the same way I did, and both of us were running for the flying deck at the same moment. We had a rifle up there somewhere, and we could gun the engines and get *Serapis* moving, but it was really futile and I knew it even as we ran. *Tempest* was three or four times faster than *Serapis* and those boys knew how to shoot and Tommy and I didn't.

Still, we had to try something, and so Tommy grabbed the unloaded rifle and started pulling open drawers and lockers, searching for some ammunition. I pushed the throttle forward.

I heard Heather behind us, coming up the steps to the flying deck. "Can you buy us a few minutes' time, Peter?"

I looked over at *Tempest*, which hadn't bothered to react yet to our slow turn to move away. More shots were fired. Twoclicks was under water, presumably swimming our way.

"Five minutes is probably all we have if they decide to come after us," I said.

Heather smiled. She was very calm. "Two minutes will do it," she said, and she started back down the steps. I heard a splash over port side and there was Twoclicks, just his face above water as another shot was fired. Nothing splashed nearby.

Instead of running I turned us to starboard and put us between *Tempest* and Twoclicks. I could hear the bullets slapping into the water, then my front glass shattered as a slug hit it and pieces of wood sprayed all around me as another shot hit the railing next to me. I felt a bee sting in my right cheek, another in my forehead, and realized I'd been hit by the shattered shards of wood.

We were, by then, blocking the aim of the Jensens and Heather went in over the side and helped Twoclicks get to the boat. I'd pulled the throttle back while they got that done and as the engine noise died down I heard a curious distant scream in the air, catlike, a yowl. Tommy helped pull them aboard and as they lay there, Heather tending to Twoclicks, I pushed the throttle all the way and headed away, *Serapis'* engines drowning out that high scream. But I knew something was coming. Something did come. The world changed.

Afterward, with *Tempest* burned to the waterline and the Jensen brothers dead, with Twoclicks nursing a flesh wound where one slug had nicked him, with me putting alcohol on the cuts on my face from where I'd pulled out the wooden splinters, with the screamship that had saved us all back in orbit and circling peacefully, with me and Heather standing there on the aft deck as Tommy took the helm and *Serapis* headed toward the Boca pass and home: a lot of things cleared up for me, a lot of realities emerged.

For starters, Heather told me I was right about everything, much to my sorrow. My brother was dying, a tumor in the brain: a glioblastoma multiforme astrocytoma. Grade IV, as deadly as it gets. He had ninety days to live if we didn't do anything, maybe a year if we went for the surgery and full chemo. Twelve months. Maybe.

The Shudonni could fix what was killing Tommy, Heather said. They had med nanos that could do the job, and Tommy's humanity didn't matter. They were expensive and proscribed for Earthies, these nanos, but Twoclicks could manage it if I was willing.

"Willing?" I asked her. "Willing to do what?"

And she told me the plan. I would leave Earth and travel to the home planet with

Two clicks and herself. I could sweep a journal and send it home. I could write a book or two about it all. I'd be well paid and I'd be comfortable. And I'd have her.

But I'd be leaving Tommy and everything else behind. For two years, she said, or maybe more. I said I'd think about it.

When we got *Serapis* back to the marina there were no officials anywhere. The only indication that anything had happened was a Coast Guard helicopter that had trailed us politely from about five miles out to the boat slip and now hovered as we tied *Serapis* off and disembarked. Then the Coasties left us to ourselves and we went our separate ways. And I chose what I had to choose, as you must know, though it all got a lot more complicated right there at the end.

Aggressive

And now here was Tommy, dying, and all bets were off.

Tommy saw the look on my face. "I look like crap, eh, Peter? Well, I should look like crap. I'm dying. The cancer's back and aggressive and I've got another couple of months, maybe, say the medics."

"I'm sorry, Tommy. I thought the cancer was in remission."

"Yeah, well, it was, until I figured out what was going on. And why. And that you were behind it all."

"Oh, Tommy." I tried to stand and managed to get to my feet — the pain seemed to be easing. "I don't know what you think is happening, but I can tell you it's a whole lot more complicated than you know."

"Sure it is, Peter. And you've got it sussed, right?"

He put his fingers to his mouth and whistled, a long, crisp single note. It echoed sharply in the gorge and then died away. A few seconds after that there was an answering whistle: two short notes and then nothing.

"Your girlfriend and that Shudonni princeling are waiting for us up ahead, Peter. We have to get moving."

"I don't think I can put any pressure on this ankle, Tommy."

He smiled. "I think you'll be surprised at how good that ankle starts to feel, Peter, at least for a few minutes." He walked over into the underbrush, pushed the snow away from a pile of branches, found one he liked, and brought it back. "Here, use this like a crutch for the first few minutes and then see what happens. It's only a half mile or so downriver to the cave and there we can talk a little more and I can clue you in on how things really are."

"Thanks," I said, and grabbed the branch. It was a long way from being a crutch, but it would help. "Maybe we can talk a bit while we walk?"

"I doubt it," Tommy said, and walked away while two others dressed in winter jackets came in from the woods to stand by me. Tommy turned back once to glance at me. "Meg and Andy will help you get there, Peter, but they're not very talkative with people like you, so I suspect you'll do best to just focus on your walking. I'll be up ahead, getting things ready. See you in a bit." And he melted away into the winter woods. It was interesting that as he disappeared into a thick stand of trees near the riverbank, the pain began to ease considerably in my ankle. And as I walked along with the very quiet Meg and Andy, the sprained ankle felt better and better. By the time we reached a pile of large boulders that had fallen to block the path, I was able to follow my guides as they scrambled over the boulders, down the other side, and then to the right and onto a narrow path that wound through more boulders, some spindly trees and, finally, to a spot where I

could see, perhaps one hundred meters ahead, the mouth of a large cave at the base of the gorge wall.

Just outside the cave mouth I saw Heather and Treble, standing there, waiting for me. I'm not great with body language when it comes to the S'hudonni, but it looked to me like Treble was sad. Couldn't say I blamed him much.

Suppression

"I'm sorry I didn't see this coming, Peter," Heather said to me as I walked up to her. "Yes, Peter, we're sorry," said Treble, who was holding Heather's hand.

Tommy wasn't around and Meg and Andy stayed behind, keeping an eye on me but not interrupting otherwise. My ankle felt sore again as I stepped inside the cave.

Heather looked . . . odd. Displaced somehow. Treble looked excited. I gave both of them a quick hug. It was good to see them alive and well.

"How did this happen, Heather?" I asked her.

"Your brother seems to have a suppressor."

"A suppressor?" I had a crazy image of one of those things the doctor uses to hold your tongue down while she looks at your throat.

"Suppressors put out a field that stops everything generated by S'hudon's technology. All the power generated, all the data feeds, the whole stream. And so everything quits working, including the nanos. Or that's what I'm told. I've never actually seen one."

"You've never seen one?" That didn't seem possible. As far as I was concerned Heather knew everything or could find it out in fractions of a second.

"I wasn't sure such a thing existed, Peter. It's said to be a First Empire artifact, something from the days before the families came to power."

I'd heard something from Heather before about the First Empire, but I'd never followed up on it. In the great flood of information I'd been wallowing in for months, the First Empire was just one more impenetrable piece of history. When was it? What was it? Obviously I needed to know.

Heather was still talking: "It's just the same as with the kelly devices, Peter. There are only a very few and no one talks about who has them or who doesn't or how they got them or even how they work."

"There are always rumors. Maybe one family or another has one; or maybe there's one for each ruling family; or, some say, the reason the families go to war so often isn't for profit, it's to get the one suppressor that's said to exist or to take a kelly away from another family."

"And Twoclicks hasn't told you exactly where the truth is in all this?"

"Two doesn't know any more than I do, I think. Or at least I thought that until today." She reached up to touch her left ear, shook her head. "I can tell you this: I'm isolated. My feed is gone. My access to the wash. It's a terrible feeling."

I could see she looked frightened by it, and I'd never seen Heather look frightened. Ever. "Where would Tommy get something like that?"

Treble had been listening quietly. At that he question he piped up with a quick low, sibilant hiss and a few clicks. Then he said in English so I could understand: "Uncle Whistle."

Heather nodded, patted him on the head. "Well, that would make sense, though it's hard to imagine Whistle having such a thing and parting with it, much less giving it to an Earthie."

I wanted to ask her about that and it might have changed some things if I'd been

able to, but that was when I heard: "Peter!" And it was Tommy, walking over toward us. He was smiling. "You and Heather get the little princeling ready for some travel. We're leaving in thirty minutes, on skis. The three of you are going to watch all the fun."

And that we most certainly did.

Several More Items of Interest

Here are some more things I have learned during my time with Twoclicks and Heather.

1) When Heather changes from one form to another the sounds are unfortunate, the smells disturbing, the sights unbearable. On a good day, the end result is pleasant—even too pleasant. On a bad day, the end result is terrifying.

2) Prostitution sneaks up on you. You think your job is to write the truth of a thing and then realize it is actually something quite different. You think you are a Cronkite and realize you're a Tokyo Rose. It's shameful, but the pay is very, very good. The deal was that I would live a very long and very healthy life thanks to S'hudon. My brother's cancer would be gone, eradicated. My sex life with Heather would be amazing. Many millions would view my sweep on a regular basis. I would be important, trusted, loved. I would not be a one-hit wonder. I would be a success.

3) Blood is thinner than the water of the Great Loop Current. Blood is angry and guilty and venomous. Blood is deadly. Blood is brothers. And brothers lie.

Release

Ihit the release button on the bindings with the tip of my left pole and then stepped out of the skis to walk over to the edge of the bluff and look out over the winter waters of Lake Ontario. My ankle felt weak, but okay. Straight ahead, a couple of kilometers across the lake, rose the Six Futures of Man, enormous and spindly towers more than four hundred meters tall. These towers and a dozen more sets of them dotted around North America propagated the wash of energy, and so the prosperity that had purchased the loyalty of most of the population. Built in a week by the nanos, "Free Power for a Free World," was how the S'hudonni styled it when the Futures first went up, long after I was already on S'hudon. Yes, "Free" came up twice in those six words. No ironies there, right?

All one had to do to enjoy this energy was buy the receiving units and play by the new rules. Most everyone had, but not my brother Tommy and his little crew of dissidents.

We had hiked and skied to get to the shoreline. I was tired after reaching the shore, Tommy's suppressor hiding us and denying us at the same time.

Tommy showed me the suppressor, such a small thing, the size of a deck of playing cards. Black, with a small touch screen on one side, its range adjustable and directional, from a few meters to several kilometers. He claimed he'd acquired it through a dissident cell on the old Canadian side: people who still loved their freedom, who hadn't been seduced by the S'hudonni. There were thousands of dissident cells all over North America, he promised me, ready to take their own action once they knew the moment had arrived and the Futures of Man had fallen. And there were tens of millions of people, he was sure, ready to rise up and join them when the moment came, when freedom came, when the towers came tumbling down. They'd give up all

those creature comforts that had been bestowed by the S'hudonni: the medical gifts, the high-speed rails, the internal comlinks that every kid had or wanted to have, the prosperity that came from a firm hand on the controls of government, of economy, of life. They'd give that all up to be free.

Me? I had my doubts. I don't know much about anything, I'll admit. But I'd spent enough time in America to know comfort mattered, and prosperity trumped trouble every time. Most Americans had spent their comfortable lives ignoring anything that hinted at discomfort, physical or emotional. In this case, given S'hudon's might, that American attitude might just be the right route to take.

Behind me, Heather and Treble were standing behind some trees, trying to stay out of the wind that came in off the lake. Just behind them were our guards, Meg and Andy. It was very cold.

I watched Heather as she slapped her arms against her chest a few times for warmth. It was unthinkable that Heather—the perfect construct, the complete package—could be cold, but there she was, shivering.

Treble, though, was smiling, enjoying himself, unaffected by the weather. Since the nanos weren't working inside the suppressor field I supposed that his warmth was natural for him. The S'hudonni were comfortable in cold water, their body fat protecting them from hypothermia. Treble probably liked it here.

I turned around again to look back over the lake and to the Futures of Man. To my right, a pair of funnel clouds edged along the back side of a squall line of lake-effect snow that was moving south and east. I hadn't realized that waterspouts could happen like that over cold water, but then that was just one of many things I was coming to realize that I didn't know.

The snow might eventually drift our way. Treble would enjoy that, I guessed, depending on what happened here at this shore.

Heather

After the turtles, after the Arribada, after the Jensen brothers, Tommy disappeared and Heather reappeared and life got very interesting for me.

I didn't worry about Tommy for the first few days. He was a big boy and he'd been through a lot. If he wanted to go find a place to walk on the beach and think it all through that was fine with me. I hoped he was doing a lot of drinking and staring at a lot of sunsets and finding some people to talk about the weather with.

For me, I came to think I was done with Heather and Twoclicks after the day I saw the Jensen brothers die and then she offered me that future out among the stars. After we got *Serapis* back to the Sea Horse Pier and tied her off, after Tommy went his way and a limousine took Twoclicks and Heather away behind tinted glass, I was alone.

I expected a call or an e-mail or a knock on the door within the day but that didn't happen. And then a second day passed and I started to think it had all been a mirage, a shining image of a distant city that would always be just out of reach. I decided that it was for the best. It was too outrageous to be real, healing Tommy and sending me on such a journey to such a place. It was unthinkable and I'd been smart to not even hint to Tommy what the offer was, the heartbreak of offering a cure and then yanking it away would have been horrendous. He was already shattered by the Death of Science, which I'd already started to Sweep and blog about. We were the natives, the aborigines, and mighty S'hudon and its Six Planets (we'd be the Seventh) had probably forgotten more about the sciences than we could ever learn.

I had just blogged on that and was thinking of heading back out to the Sea Horse

Pier to do a Sweep follow-up when there was a knock at the door and there, when I opened it, stood Heather.

"Where's Tommy?" I asked her, angry that she was here and suspecting that she and Twoclicks knew where he was.

She walked in past me and went over to the bar, poured herself a glass of water, took a sip. "He's all right, Peter. And hello, it's nice to see you again, too."

"Tommy's been gone since we all left the boat, Heather. No phone calls, no texts, no e-mails, no nothing."

"We're keeping an eye on him. He's on Caladesi Island, alone, camping, smoking his cigarettes. There are several turtle nests there, leatherbacks, and he's camped right next to them. He keeps trying to go for walks on the beach."

"Trying?"

"He's dying, Peter. He doesn't know that yet, but his cancer is very aggressive. For now, he has a headache that won't quit, and he's dizzy and disoriented much of the time. There's some nausea. In another week that will all get worse. In six more weeks he'll be dead."

"Unless?"

"Yes, Peter. Unless you come with us. And Twoclicks promises he'll make it very comfortable for you there. Just like home."

I laughed. "Sure, all my friends will be there, and when I'm in the mood I'll head over to the Harp and Thistle for a shepherd's pie and a pint of imported Guinness, right? And there's always some basketball on the high-def and the latest movies to watch, too, right? And plenty of half-court hoops with my friends?"

"Close," she said, smiling. "You'll be the only human, but otherwise, sure, there will be plenty of home cooking, and you'll get televised sports and all the rest, Peter, including plenty of exercise. We'll make you comfortable, I promise."

"Two years? That's it, and then I come home."

"Two years, Peter, and then home if you want it. Or you can stay longer if you want that. That's not long, Peter; just a couple of years and you'll return as one of the richest—and healthiest—men on Earth."

"Healthy? Those nanos?"

She nodded. "We're not sure how you'll age, Peter. You're the first human to get this kind of full treatment. But you are definitely going to be one very healthy guy."

"And Peter will live?"

"Peter's cancer could be in remission by tomorrow, Peter, and gone, eradicated completely, a day or two after that. All he'll know is that he feels a lot better. He'll figure it was a virus and he's thrown it off at last."

So it was all pretty obvious, except for one thing: "Why me, Heather?"

She walked over to me, stood close, her face a foot away from mine. Those lips, those eyes. She leaned up to kiss me and I sank into the embrace. The smell of her, the feel of her; these mattered as much as anything. I was lost. Utterly.

We pulled apart a few inches. "Okay?" she asked. And I nodded, picked her up, and walked her back to the bar, set her atop it, started, slowly, deliberately, pulling her T-shirt over her head. Those perfect breasts. My god. I kissed the nipple on the right breast. The left. Still kissing the breasts, then her lips, then back to the breasts, the side of the neck; each kiss a light touch as her breath caught. The smell of her was perfection. Perfection. I reached to her shorts and was undoing the front button as she leaned over me, her hair falling over me as she kissed the top of my head, her hands on my cheeks. The button loosened.

And I heard the door behind me open. Heard a cry of anger and anguish and disgust and pain. I turned. It was Tommy. Standing there. Watching us.

And he turned and fled. And me? I went to S'hudon.

In the Water

There was an object out in the water, working its way toward the shore. That would be Tommy, I was certain. He'd kayaked away from the cold stone beach a couple of hours ago, heading out toward the Futures in an old small Swift kayak with an electrical trolling motor attached to the back, its footprint blocked from S'hudon's detection by Tommy's suppressor set to cover him, even as it still covered us. He carried a half-dozen bangers, their signatures blocked by the same suppressor. The bangers were small things, no bigger than a loaf of bread; but they would bring down the Futures of Man, no question about it.

His plan was to attach the bangers to the central tower and head back to meet us on the shoreline before he sent the signal to ignite the bangers. Then we could all watch as Everything Changed, as he said to me just before climbing into the kayak.

Well, here he was, heading toward us. Great, just great.

Heather walked up to me. She held Treble by the hand, that thin arm of his reaching up to Heather and all three of those short, stubby S'hudonni fingers buried in Heather's hand.

The three of us stood on the bluff and watched Tommy motor in the last two hundred meters to the shore. We could hear the scraping of the bottom of the kayak as it hit the shoreline rocks. Tommy got out, looked up at us, and walked our way, up the narrow switchback path that climbed the bluff from rocky beach to where we stood. We watched him climb, going slowly. I was guessing he was very tired.

Finally he began to near the top of the bluff.

Heather's other hand found mine and she squeezed. "I want you to know something, Peter."

I looked at her.

"Whatever happens in the next few minutes, I want you to know this: I love you. As much as I'm capable, I love you. I always have."

Treble giggled and reached up with his other hand to grab mine, so the three of us all held hands there while Tommy climbed up to us. "I love you, too, Uncle Peter. Can I call you 'Uncle Peter'? I will call you 'Uncle Peter'. And you're the very best Earthie that ever was!" And he hugged me, those arms not quite making it around my waist.

Good grief. I admit to a certain confusion. Love and hugs?

"Heather," I said, "What the hell is going on?"

But Tommy got to the top of the bluff before she could answer.

He stood there, catching his breath, panting as he leaned over to put his hands on his knees and recover from the climb.

Then he stood up straight. He looked terrible: pale, gaunt, his eyes feverish and sunken. "Well, Peter," he said, struggling to say it through that troubled breathing as he reached into a jacket pocket and pulled out the suppressor. "Well, here we go, brother. This is it. First, I turn this off," and he thumbed it. I could actually feel the difference. I felt better, stronger. He tossed the suppressor to Andy, who caught it and held it in his hand as he walked over with Meg and each of them took a side and helped Tommy stand up straight. It occurred to me that Tommy might have been exaggerating about the number of people he had in his little group of dissidents. He might have been exaggerating about a lot of things, in fact. But the three of them were all that was needed at the moment. Meg reached into a pocket and pulled out a small device the size and shape of an old-fashioned pen. She handed it to Tommy. So that meant the remote that would start this war had been right here by me for hours. I could have fought for it. I could have tried.

Treble let go of my hand and so did Heather. They backed away to stand alone.

Tommy was busy using both hands to pull down on one side of the device, then press on the opposite side. On the top side a round, phallic segment emerged and grew to six or seven centimeters in height. Tommy held the device in his hand and looked out toward the Futures of Man.

"Tommy," I said, "you know this doesn't have to happen. All hell is going to break loose. A lot of people, a lot of humans, are going to die. Please, Tommy, think about it. Heather can talk to Twoclicks back on S'hudon. You can negotiate. You can get what you want and no one has to die. Including you, Tommy. You can live. The nanos can heal you."

He turned to look at me. "You're so stupid, Peter. You really think that's what this is about?"

"Tommy. You know we can't let you do this." It was Heather.

"That's right," Treble piped in. "We can't allow this."

I turned to pat the cute little princeling on his head, wondering if he—or any of us—would survive the next few minutes.

But Treble didn't need any comfort from his Uncle Peter. Instead, Treble's right hand was buried in the folds of his fleshy gut and he was pulling something from those folds. The small little antique derringer from Twoclicks' collection. How had he hidden it there? I had no idea.

Treble stood taller than I'd have thought he could. He aimed the pistol at Tommy, who wasn't more than two meters away. "I'm sorry," he said.

Meg and Andy had weapons out now, some kind of handguns, aimed at Treble. Tommy waved at them to hold their fire.

Tommy shook his head. "That old thing can't possibly fire, little princeling." And then he laughed. "And, hell, I'm dead anyway soon." He pulled his thumb down on the remote and there was a bright flash behind us, out in the lake. He tossed the remote down onto the ground, shoved the suppressor into his pocket.

"Yes," said Treble, "my father told me you'd think that." And he pulled the trigger and the derringer fired. The force of the slug striking his chest staggered Tommy and sent him reeling. In a kind of terrible slow motion I saw Meg and Andy begin firing their weapons and the bullets hit Treble as he fired again and this one, too, caught Tommy in the chest and sent him backward, flailing, as he went over the edge of the bluff.

The sound of the explosion from the Futures of Man caught up with the light from the blast and I felt a concussion as I heard a low, rumbling boom. Treble was falling, hit by multiple shots fired by Meg and Andy. Heather was turning toward them—heroics in mind, I suppose—as they changed aim to fire at her. She didn't make it more than a few steps toward them before she fell.

I thought about doing something heroic myself, but by now it should be clear to you that I am no hero; I am, rather, a strugger, a striver, a drudge.

So I turned to run, thinking I might jump over the edge of the bluff and hope to catch enough scrub brush on the way down to survive the fall.

"Uncle Peter," I heard from behind as I turned.

I turned back. It was little Treble, bleeding and dying but still holding the derringer. He raised the gun to aim it at me.

"I don't understand," I said, wondering if the weapon was real or a clever fake, capable of anything. Could it fire another shot?

It could. "I'm sorry, Uncle," he said as he pulled the trigger. I felt a horrible blow against the center of my chest and had a moment or two to think about why he'd done that to me—weren't we pals, little Treble and I?—as I felt my legs give way beneath me and I collapsed toward the ground. I kneeled there, shocked. Treble seemed to be healing, and that weapon was no antique. He turned and fired at Meg

and Andy, and as they fell the suppressor fell free onto the ground. Heather was rising, smiling at me as she picked up the suppressor, thumbed it to make some adjustment, and then, at least, came pain but also a sort of peace as it all began to recede from there and then it was getting very dark and there was a welcome, quiet calm and then there was darkness and a most profound peace at last.

Things Emerge

Abble emerged from the muck, slowly cleared as it rose, and then abruptly popped. It smelled of cinnamon and apple. It smelled like winter in Racine at Grandma's house and my brother Tommy and I were just in from sledding and there were a lot of complicated things to do for two Florida kids visiting Grandma up north—taking off the mittens, taking off the knit caps, taking off the bulky down coats, undoing a long row of clasps on each rubber boot, shucking the boots, getting out of the snow pants, hanging all this up to dry on various nails in the snow-room before we could finally sit down. And all that time we could smell the hot cider and it was so incredibly appealing that we could barely stand being patient and waiting for Grandma to pour it into the cups for us and set it down in front of us.

But that was long ago, in another reality.

Here, in this reality, I was waking up from a deep sleep, and doing it while sitting in the hot muck of a backyard fumarole with Twoclicks. As my head slowly cleared I saw his smiling face emerge from the mud, eyes open as they cleared the muck, their membranes sliding back, then that porpoise smile of his emerging.

"Good memories?" Twoclicks asked me with that lisp of his.

They were. "How did you know I was thinking of home?"

He just smiled, then laughed. He was happy about something. Then he disappeared again beneath the bubbling mud and water and a final cinnamon bubble rose and popped.

I heard the sound of bare feet over the rock path that led to the fumarole from the house and I turned to see who it was.

Heather. Beautiful Heather. In her S'hudonni form, waddling toward me. I could see beneath or through or past that form, and I chose to think of the human form as her truest self, knowing it was a lie.

"Hello, Peter," she said. "Looks like you're finally really awake."

She looked at the spot where Twoclicks had just disappeared; the mud was smoother there in a small circle of calm. "And Twoclicks was just chatting with you, I'm guessing?"

"He was, but he didn't really say much. What the hell happened, Heather? I thought I'd wake up on Earth and we'd go find Tommy."

"It's a rather long story, Peter, but the simplest truth is that you've been there now several times and we all did what we had to do. You just don't remember any of it."

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"Been there? To Earth?"

She held out a thin hand at the end of a frail arm and I took it. I heard the patter of smaller feet against the stones and turned to see little Treble, Twoclicks' heir and my favorite of the various princelings. He smiled and took Heather's other hand.

"Peter," Heather said, "We have some terrible news for you."

"Terrible news?" I was, after all, barely awake.

"Terrible," said Treble, looking very somber.

I needed to get out of that fumarole. Only on S'hudon would they think it perfectly normal for someone to return to conscious thought to find himself in hot mud. I started to rise, but Heather put a hand on my shoulder to stop me.

"Tommy is dead, Peter. I'm sorry."

I sat back down into the muck. I didn't know what to say. My job had been to go to Earth and keep Tommy alive and calm things down. Tommy? Dead?

"Apparently I didn't do a very good job on Earth."

"You did just fine, Uncle Peter," said Treble. "It wasn't really your fault."

Wasn't really my fault? What the hell did that mean? Treble reached out to take my hand. "You did really, really good, Uncle Peter. Honest. You'll realize it once you see the memory feeds."

"That's true, Peter," said Heather, "it was all very necessary and you were something of a hero." There was a disturbance over on the other side of the fumarole and Twoclicks' head emerged. I'd forgotten he was in there.

"Yesss," he said, "you did fine, friend Peter. Tommy chose death."

Oh, my god.

Heather spoke: "He was killed on the first day of fighting, Peter. He's a great hero to millions of people now, but he paid a terrible price for it. You'll get the details later."

"There was fighting?"

"A kind of civil war has broken out."

"But the fighting goesss well," said Twoclicks. "Our side prosspers."

Heather patted my hand. "You'll see, Peter. Twoclicks' territory on Earth looks like it's going to double. All of North America will be his. Whistle will have to capitulate soon." She smiled. "Poor Whistle's technology keeps failing at critical moments. There's a little device we obtained because of your help that gives us the tool to win this war."

Treble giggled.

"And meanwhile," Heather was saying, "Two has plans for you. Right, Two?"

"Yess. Big planss for Peter." And he disappeared again into the mud.

Great, I thought. Big plans. But Tommy was dead? How did it happen? I needed to know the hows and whys of his death. I needed to mourn.

Heather held out her hand to help me out of the mud, and I stepped up and out. Treble handed me a towel. "You were great, Uncle Peter. Wait till I tell you the whole story. You were very brave."

"Yes, Peter, wait until we tell you the story," Heather said, "But first," and she smiled, "let's get you inside and cleaned up."

And she took my hand and waddled toward the door. I had questions, a lot of them. About Tommy. About life and death and myself. About those plans.

But later, while I was in the shower, there was a crackling and some groans from the bed in the other room as Heather changed. And so I finished the shower knowing that she would be there for me, my Heather. I stepped out of the shower and patted myself dry and then walked from the shower room into the bedroom. I took a deep breath and set aside my worries as she reached out to me and she pulled me to her. The questions—there were so many questions—would have to wait. ○

NEXT ISSUE

DECEMBER ISSUE

With our December issue we return to our single-issue size, but somehow, we manage to cram nine dynamic stories into it. Our cover story is a novelette by Hugo-, Nebula-, and multiple Readers' Award-winning writer **James Patrick Kelly**. "Plus or Minus" puts the author's fascinating character, Mariska Volchkova—the genetically altered teenager who can hibernate on deep-space voyages—and puts her and other young people into a truly perious situation. The beautiful cover is by John Picacio. Later in the issue, veteran author **Tom Purdom**'s novelette plunges us into a battle of "Warfriends" that involves two sentient alien races and their human military advisor.

ALSO IN DECEMBER

Our terrific array of short stories includes Hugo- and Nebula-award-winning author **Michael Swanwick**'s dramatic tale of a motorcycle journey across "Libertarian Russia." New author **Gregory Norman Bossert** presents us with a rather unusual viewpoint character in "Freia in the Sunlight" while Hugo-Award-winning author **Robert Reed** challenges his characters to achieve "Excellence." Children and offspring are the focus in **Sara Genge**'s poignant tale about the people who must atone for the "Sins of the Father"; Nebula- and Philip K. Dick- Award winner **Carol Emshwiller**'s gentle and surprising story of "Uncle E"; and brand new author **Ian Werkheiser**'s painful debut tale of love and loss and musical "Variations." In a future where non-augmented athletes have reached the limits of perfection, **Ian Creasey** reveals what may be "The Prize Beyond Gold."

OUR EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg offers us some absorbing "Reflections" on "Rereading Kornbluth"; **Peter Heck** contributes "On Books"; plus we'll have a set of poetry you're sure to enjoy. Look for our December issue on sale at newsstands on October 5, 2010. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's*—in paper format or in downloadable varieties —by visiting us online at www.asimovs.com. We're also available on *Amazon.com*'s Kindle!

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TIME, SPACE, AND CULTURE

THE WINDUP GIRL

by Paolo Bacigalupi

Night Shade, \$24.95

ISBN: 978-1597801577

GARDENS OF THE SUN

by Paul McAuley

Pyr, \$16.00

ISBN: 978-1616141967

GALILEO'S DREAM

by Kim Stanley Robinson

Spectra, \$26.00

ISBN: 978-0553806595

BABYLON BABIES

by Maurice G. Dantec

Del Rey, \$6.99

ISBN: 978-0345505972

In my most recent column here, "Third World Worlds," I considered science fiction written by First World writers set in Third World milieus: the relative paucity of same, the difficulties involved in writing it, and particularly in conveying at least the illusion to the reader that it is "authentic," that it could have been written by someone whose consciousness was formed by and within the culture in question, rather than from an outsider viewpoint.

I wrote that essay before I read Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl*, set in a future Thailand; or Paul McAuley's sequel to *The Quiet War* (considered therein), *Gardens of the Sun*, set mostly in the outer solar system but also in a future Brazil and North America; or *Galileo's Dream* by Kim Stanley Robinson, also partly set in a future outer solar system but at least equally in the Renaissance Italy of the title and viewpoint character, Galileo Galilei himself.

I had some time ago read Maurice G.

Dantec's *Babylon Babies*, set mostly in future Montreal and post-Soviet Central Asia. Somehow I found myself pondering these four novels together, wondering why I felt there was something in common among them, and why that elusive something seemed an expansion of the literary and cultural questions explored in "Third World Worlds," namely that in literary terms, and particularly in science fictional terms, a truly alien culture in the sense of not being the culture of the writer or the reader could just as well be set in the near future on Earth, somewhere in outer space in the further future, or yes, even in the well-recorded past.

And for would-be writers, and possible readers, of same, there could be literary denominators common to all three.

Bacigalupi is an American writing a novel set in future Thailand. Robinson is an American writing a novel half-set in historical Renaissance Italy, and all of it from the viewpoint of a Galileo both accurately historical and speculative. McAuley is a Brit writing a novel set dominantly in the inhabited outer moons of a future solar system, but involved in a war for cultural survival against a future Brazilian autocracy. Dantec is a Frenchman living in Montreal who may or may not have been on the ground during the recent Balkan wars following the breakup of Yugoslavia writing a novel set in a relatively near future Montreal and "Wild East" Central Asia.

McAuley has lived in the United States, though for a fellow Anglophone that is not such an alien culture as Switzerland and Nepal, where Robinson has lived and as well has spent considerable time in other non-Anglophone parts of Europe, if not in its historic past. Dantec is now living in a bilingual country and on a continent not of his birth and seems to have spent time

during his younger years at least as far east as Moscow. Bacigalupi, I have been given to understand, has lived in Thailand. And, as a personal note, because such disclaimers seem to be journalistic de riguer these days, I have lived in France for fifteen years and traveled fairly widely in Eastern Europe.

What am I getting at?

Well, with the semi-exception of Paul McAuley, I and the authors of the other three novels in question here have all lived in cultures not of our origin long enough to be partially imbedded in both of them, and therefore not entirely in either. And this would seem to create, or at least encourage, a kind of generalized cultural and literary binocular vision.

Even when the fiction in question is not set in either culture. Even when it is set in a past or a future somewhere and/or sometimes when that the writer could not possibly have visited.

I myself can testify that living in France had a positive effect on the portions of my novel *Russian Spring* set in a Soviet Union I had never set foot in until I had written two drafts. And somehow also on *Mexica*, a straight historical set in a Mexico I had sojourned in for a few months, but of course never in the sixteenth century Aztec empire in which it is set.

Dantec is someone I sort of know well. But Maurice is a guy rather close-mouthed and/or ambiguous about where he had been or what he had done in his earlier life. In any case, it's doubtful he could have spent time in the Central Asian "stans," which during that era were parts of the Soviet Union and nearly impossible to get into from the West.

Bacigalupi apparently lived in Thailand, or so I was told, and even if I hadn't been, I would have thought so, because I find it hard to imagine that he could have written *The Windup Girl* if he hadn't, as we'll get to a bit later.

Robinson is well-traveled, but of course he couldn't have visited Renaissance Italy, a clade of cultures significantly different from the Italy of today.

So I would contend that here we have a

literary nexus where writers of science fiction and historical fiction who have lived in cultures not their own share something that at least enhances the imaginative extrapolative imagination of a writer attempting either—namely the aforementioned generalized literary and cultural binocular vision.

For shining example, take *Galileo's Dream*, in which Kim Stanley Robinson masterfully succeeds at both within the pages of one novel. *Galileo's Dream* is both a complete, and as far as I can tell scrupulously accurate, biography of Galileo Galilei, the great astronomer, who herein is revealed as a master of other sciences and technologies as well, and a science fiction novel in which the same Galileo is periodically transported into the more or less far-future societies of the Jovian Moons. There he is revered as the pivotal figure in the victory of science over religion, and therefore inextricably involved in the future political and philosophical and finally physical battles among the fractious factions thereof.

While Galileo did not invent the telescope, as an accomplished scientific craftsman he did much to quickly improve the earlier, more primitive version (something that I myself was unaware of before I read Robinson's novel) to the point where he was able to be the first to see the four largest moons of Jupiter, the *Galilean Moons*, as they have come to be called.

We probably all know that Galileo championed the solar-centric reality that the other "heavenly bodies" revolved around the sun and not the Earth. This got him into such perilous trouble with the Roman Catholic Church that he was eventually imprisoned by the Inquisition on the orders of the Pope, given the Guantanamo treatment, and ultimately faced with the choice of either being burned at the stake as a heretic or recanting what he never ceased to know and believe was the truth. And chose to recant to save himself from the flames.

Okay, so that's the short version of the true historical story that we all here

probably already know, but after reading Kim Stanley Robinson's novel, I at least came away from it informed that in many respects the devil was in the details. And Robinson's complete, and, as far as I can tell, exhaustively researched, version of the tale reveals that the situation was much more complex and even ambiguous.

For one thing, the idea that the Earth and the planets revolved around the sun was originated not by Galileo but by Copernicus, which most of us will remember when reminded. In the simplified short version the Catholic authorities up to and including the Pope seem like not only villains but willfully ignorant boobs. But in Robinson's version, their opposition to the true Copernican model was both more subtle, yet in a sense even more intellectually reprehensible, because for many of the more realistically minded Catholic prelates, the motivation was as political as it was theological, or even more so.

This, after all, was the fairly early Renaissance, when the kings and princes of the various nascent nation-states were still more or less vassals of the Pope, when the Church was still trying to maintain its transnational sovereignty, and nowhere more so than in the Italian city-states.

The theological point being that the divine infallibility of the Church rested in large and decisive part on Faith in the Bible as Absolute Truth in all matters on which it spoke, even when the Biblical version was contradicted by reason and/or scientific evidence. Perhaps even more so when it was contradicted by reason or scientific evidence, because the political point was that if the Church acknowledged error or incomplete knowledge in the word of the Bible, its worldly power would begin to unravel, which of course it eventually did, and even its theological and philosophical credibility would be threatened.

If science contradicted the Bible, if reason contradicted Faith, one had damned well better choose Faith with a great big

capital F, or one would indeed be damned to be burned at the stake as a heretic and damned to an eternity in hell afterward.

This is what Galileo faced, and Robinson has written not just a historical novel, not just a biography, but a historical biographical novel that gives us, if not possibly the real psychological depths of the man, which can never really be proven one way or the other, certainly a cantankerous, querulous, spiritually, morally, and theologically tormented character, who was no simple atheist or agnostic, who more or less considered himself still a Catholic, and who therefore twisted and turned in the wind trying and failing to reconcile what he knew to be scientific truth with a shaky Faith he knew to be factually wrong in such matters. He opted for Faith only to save his ass from the stake, but recanted his recantation toward the end of his life, and more or less privately, rather than publicly.

If this were the entirety of *Galileo's Dream*, it would be a fine historical novel, meeting all the literary requirements thereof, even a great one. But it isn't. It's only half the novel, or something a bit more than that, alternating with Galileo's periodic abductions into the far future of the Jovian Moons by various competing political and philosophical factions, to all of whom he is the iconic and pivotal figure beginning the victory of reason and science in the slow centuries-long conflict between reason and science and religious faith that in the end has produced their own clade of cultures.

All agree on this much, but one of the factions believes that things would have turned out much better, or at least much faster, short-circuiting centuries of dire history, if Galileo had not recanted what he knew to be scientific truth to save his life, but had held steadfast and been burned at the stake, which in decades, not centuries, would have discredited religion and blind ignorant Faith and allowed reason and science to gain the catbird seat in the hearts and minds of men and women much more rapidly in terms

of historical time. And that faction tries to persuade Galileo that it is his moral duty to accept this destiny and so change history for the better.

The novel is called *Galileo's Dream*, and whether you take his adventures and misadventures in the far future of the Galilean Moons as a time-travel story, which would seem to be Robinson's intent, or just as a series of dreams, his internal dream life, in the end it really doesn't matter. Because the genius of the novel is that the consciousness of Galileo the time-traveler or dreamer is at one with the consciousness of the historical character in the true historical story that Kim Stanley Robinson has so powerfully and deeply told, and the ultimate spiritual and moral crisis that he faces in the future is on a deep level that which the historical Galileo faced in the historical seventeenth century, tying the two threads of the novel perfectly together.

And yet . . .

And yet Kim Stanley Robinson has written quite a few science fiction novels set in solar system-wide civilizations, and yes, in the outer moons, fine and well-realized straight science fiction novels that masterfully bring those civilizations to life on all levels. He does a good job doing much the same thing with the civilizations of the Jovian Moons in *Galileo's Dream*, too, but it somehow doesn't seem on quite the level of verisimilitude as either his previous such creations or his bringing to life of Renaissance Italy in this one.

He entirely succeeds in rendering Galileo as the same character in both time-frames, but more embedded in his historical culture than in that of his namesake moons in Robinson's fictional future, because—and here I may be presuming a bit too much critical clairvoyance—Robinson seems more involved himself in bringing Renaissance Italy to life in fine sensual, political, and micro-cultural detail than in creating a future culture that does much more than entirely well-serve his overall story purposes.

Or not.

Perhaps it is simply a matter of exhaustive research of the past allowing a deeper, more detailed, and more heartfelt rendering thereof than pure imagination painting a picture on a blank white canvas.

Or not.

Paul McAuley, in *Gardens of the Sun*, and in *The Quiet War*—to which it is a sequel, and I would strongly guess is the second novel in a trilogy—creates a whole series of future civilizations in the very same outer solar system venue that have an elusive something that Robinson's version somewhat lacks, whereas his future Greater Brazil is a pale shadow of Robinson's Renaissance Italy.

Again, admittedly a bit of critical hubris. But it seems to me that these disparities are perhaps deliberate on the parts of both authors, Robinson being more deeply involved with Renaissance Italy than with the imagined civilization in the outer solar system, though in other works he's been on McAuley's level with the same material. While McAuley is more involved with the universe of his fictional future outer solar system than with goings-on back on Earth, which here seem more servants of the story, though he has written powerful relatively near-future Earthbound science fiction.

In broad terms, *Gardens of the Sun* and *The Quiet War*—and, I would more than suspect, the third volume, whatever it is called, too—are episodes in a single continuous tale. Or, to put it the other away around, a single novel being published in multiple parts, set in the same fictional universe, with at least some of the same characters set front and center in both of them, and a story line in *Gardens of the Sun* that picks up after the ending of *The Quiet War* and seems to have well set up a third volume at the end, though McAuley does a better job than most in giving each episode a satisfactory dénouement.

This, of course, is by now a time-honored, and one might even say economical-

ly dominant, form of SF publishing and therefore of what gets published and therefore of what gets written. The thematic core and story is also part of a speculative literary tradition that goes back even further, namely the conflict between the libertarian colonies within our solar system and the political, economic, and military hegemony of a reactionary, ecologically, and politically dispirited retrograde Earth. Humanity's space-going future fighting for freedom from the more or less dying past that paradoxically gave it birth.

When this sort of thing first began to be written, the revolutionaries generally inhabited the asteroid belt, where the abundance of small bodies meant the possibility or inevitability of many diverse pocket cultures, sometimes including the Moon and/or Mars. But more recently, this mode of science fiction has moved outward to the moons of the gas giants, Jupiter and Saturn in particular, perhaps because more recent explorations by probes have revealed them not only as more plentiful sources of the basics—water ice for oxygen and hydrogen, methane and more complex organic molecules for complex material syntheses—but more likely venues for independently evolved biospheres, despite the cold and the weak sunlight.

Still more recently, the concept of post-humanity has entered this thematic material. The idea that it makes more sense to at least partially adapt human beings to these different natural environments than to confine them to enclosed bubbles maintaining terrestrial conditions. Or, to put it another way, that scientific and technological developments will lead the forefront of humanity in this direction, that a kind of environment-forced evolution will speciate humanity from a single species into a clade of separate species, and that this is not a bad thing, but a transcendent destiny for the space-going genus.

This is where Paul McCauley is coming from in these novels. One might say this is where he is heading, if the process

had not been already well underway in *The Quiet War*, and proceeding apace in *Gardens of the Sun*. Other writers have trod this path before him. This is already a classic theme and story within the literature; there are no few novels and stories that have explored it successfully. But here McCauley, perhaps partly due to his scientific background as a biologist, has carried it incrementally further onward.

In *Gardens of the Sun*, and earlier in *The Quiet War*, the outer moons have already been endowed with technologically created "biospheres" growing out of given local conditions including total vacuum, thanks in large part to the merging of genetic engineering and nanotechnology, where the distinction between "living organisms" and self-replicating nano-tech molecular or even atomic level "machinery" has been blurred or even erased.

The idea being that what is really necessary for life is not "Green Zone" liquid water conditions but only sources of energy, not just sunlight, but geothermal, nuclear, whatever works, whatever it takes, and the necessary raw materials, not necessarily limited to organics, which can always be synthesized by sophisticated enough technology or, indeed, natural alien evolution.

McAuley creates these fictional biospheres out there in the cold and dark in great abundance, and with as much detail and scientific credibility as can be managed by someone working back here in the twenty-first century. He may have been equaled now and again, but certainly never surpassed in bringing it all to emotional and esthetic and even spiritual life for the reader in general, and, more challengingly, with scientific credibility for those in the deeper know.

This would seem to be his central passion in *The Quiet War*. Even more so in *Gardens of the Sun*, whose title is revealed as somewhat ironic in the end, consciously meant so or not, where he takes it to the logical next level. Which is that, given a sufficient energy source, and given sufficient raw material on the

basic atomic elemental level, these sorts of space-going sufficiently technological-ly advanced civilizations have no need for *the Sun*, or any other sun, or even planets, moons, or asteroids, or anything else to be the lords of their own creation. Something, ahem, which I have explored in extremis in *Riding the Torch*.

But McAuley carries it one step fur-ther than I did, a step that in retrospect I might have shied away from out of sub-conscious distaste, or even fear, some-thing that his Greater Brazil, his retro-grade Brazil and Earth, openly fear and despise, and which is more or less their proclaimed *casus belli*.

In *Riding the Torch*, all the characters, all the inhabitants of my transcendent starship fleet civilization are phenotypi-cally human, homo sapiens by any and all definition. But in *The Quiet War*, and even more so in *Gardens of the Sun*, they are not. "Humanity" is well into the process of speciation, of transforming into a clade of physically diverse species, some more extremely divergent from "base hu-manity" than others. But the process itself is an existential threat to the posterity of "true humanity" as his Greater Brazilians see it, and maybe as I unknow-ingly saw it, too. And I must confess that I'm not sure I don't remain a bit of a "base humanity chauvinist" myself even after reading and enjoying these novels. Some-thing about it makes the basic human skin crawl at least a bit, doesn't it?

Not that I can root for the Greater Brazilians, whom McAuley depicts as ruled by an autocratic, plutocratic, semi-feudal, hereditary aristocratic class, to be combated by the free beings of the outer moons, and overthrown by its vas-sals back on Earth.

Psychologically and culturally an echo of the British class mentality to someone who lived in England for a while like me, and perhaps to a Brit like McAuley, de-liberately and knowingly.

But this, at least to me, and I would imagine even more so to Brazilians them-selves, is not convincing as something Brazil, Greater or not, could evolve into,

even in a century or three. Brazil was born as a Portuguese colony populated by en-slaved Africans, by native American tribes, by colonists from the imperial power, and later by their well-mixed descendants. It was an "Empire" with an Emperor for a while after gaining sovereignty, but not for long. The history of the country, which includes military coups and dictatorships, democratic restorations, creative tensions between the central government and the state governments, the multi-cultural nature of the Brazilian populace, its very kick-ass fractious spirit, makes it very difficult to credit that it could ossify into the sort of system that McAuley de-scribes.

Paradoxically, McAuley's entirely im-aginary set of future transhuman clades and cultures has much more emotional, spiritual, and cultural credibility than his Greater Brazil extrapolated as the future form and destiny of the nation we know today, which seems to exist pri-marily as a plot-purpose foil.

Or perhaps not so paradoxically, since McAuley's heart in these novels seems out there in the far future of the infinite outer reaches rather than back on planet Earth. They would work just as well were the foil a future Greater Congo or Greater Indonesia or Greater Arabia, though maybe not as the likely obvious, a Greater European Union, mentioned as a Brazilian ally but never described, which might cut too close to home, or worse still a Greater America, which would make the analogy all too specifically political.

So maybe McAuley's choice was delib-erate. Maybe a more fully-realized ad-versary would have shifted the focus away from where he wanted it. Maybe a rather unconvincing generic foil was the right literary choice after all.

On the other hand, and once again this is a bit of questionable critical tea-leaf reading, McAuley *has* lived outside his native England, meaning outside its vestigial but still psychologically and culturally puissant class system, long enough to be able to see it with the afore-mentioned binocular vision. And per-

haps modeling his dystopian "Greater Brazil" more on an extrapolation of that than of the real Brazil was a bit of a sly dig, consciously or not.

These multicultural complexities in the lives of writers can and do effect what they write, often to positive affect, as witness Kim Stanley Robinson and *Galileo's Dream*. But also sometimes in more subtle and ambiguous ways, as witness Maurice G. Dantec's *Babylon Babies*.

I should point out that not only is Dantec a now-distant friend of mine, but we spent many hours together working on a music CD in Paris before he moved to Canada, performed live together in New York, and so forth. And yet the details of Maurice's biographical background remain something of a mystery even to me, and in some weird way, perhaps even to Dantec himself.

I know that he was a so-called "Red Diaper Baby," raised in a Paris suburb with a Communist political culture, and traveled to the other side of the Iron Curtain to festivals in Moscow and possibly other parts of the Soviet Union. I know that he was very passionate about the wars resulting from the fragmentation of Yugoslavia, that the lead character in *Babylon Babies*, Hugo Toorop, was also the lead in his earlier novel *La Sirene Rouge* (which I adapted into a film), where he had been deeply and politically involved as a mercenary-cum-journalist (or vice versa) in those Balkan wars.

Was Dantec on the ground there, too? Or was Toorop a kind of fictional projection of what he wished he had done? I can't really say, which is odd, but there it is, and for present literary purposes, it really doesn't matter.

La Sirene Rouge was set in the present, or the near-past. But *Babylon Babies* is set in the more or less near future, and this incarnation of Toorop, though characterologically more or less identical, was and is involved not in the Balkans, but in the so-called "stans" of former Soviet Central Asia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan—a warlord

and gangster-ridden Wild East, where he served more than one side as a forthright mercenary in the endless machinations, conflicts, and double-crosses among them and various national intelligence agencies.

It's hard to believe that Maurice Dantec could have been there when these environs were still part of the Soviet Union. Outsiders had no easy access even if they were official invitees to youth festivals in Moscow, and of course he couldn't have been there in this fictional future.

I haven't been there either, but somehow the sections of *Babylon Babies* set there, even in the near-future, have the ring of authenticity. I can't vouch for actual accuracy, but the spirit and political culture and cynical chaos of it all rings true, at least to me, perhaps because Dantec portrays Toorop's interior life with such depth and passion. Perhaps simply because he's done such a masterful job of extrapolating this future milieu that, from the news, seems in the process of coming into being.

This, after all, is science fiction.

But there seems to be more to it than that. Dantec the man has always been strongly, passionately, and puissantally political—as witness, for example, in his masterful psychoanalysis of fascism in *Les Racines du Mal (The Roots of Evil)*. So much so that events in the real world, particularly in the Balkans, have moved him from something like the left to something like the right, to the point where he had himself tattooed with the NATO emblem.

Whether he was personally involved in the chaos in the Balkans or not, he certainly was politically and emotionally involved. And I strongly suspect that this depth and passion was transferred to the imagined situation in his near-future Central Asia, as witness the fact that his ongoing character Toorop has been involved in both in the span of two novels.

In contrast, the core science fictional schtick is the weakest part of the novel. Toorop gets involved in a complex ma-

trioschka doll series of plots, schemes, double-crosses, and violent confrontations, in Central Asia, in Montreal, the purpose of which is to bring the Babylon Babies of the title into the world and somehow for the gain of the various factions, and/or to prevent this from happening.

The Babylon Babies are genetically engineered fetuses carried by a girl that Toorop is commissioned to protect and deliver. They are created mutants of some nebulous kind designed to be the next level of humanity, and thereby transform "reality" itself.

Or something like that. This is the McGuffin, but at least to this reader, it borders on mystical mumbo-jumbo gibberish even when the consciousness of the Babies is portrayed at the end. Maybe especially then, in stark contrast to the coherent and detailed verisimilitude of the rest of the novel, particularly the parts set in the Wild East of future Central Asia.

To me, at least, this McGuffin is the least successful element of the novel, and on some level the least important, even though it seems that Dantec, in his unsuccessful effort to render the outré consciousness of the Babylon Babies coherent, takes this task very, very seriously. On the other hand, the title itself, with its rather direct reference to the Tower of Babel, may be some kind of auctorial admission that this is impossible.

Passionate involvement in a culture not your own, on the ground, or in your imagination, even when transmogrified as a kind of political, cultural, and psychological template to a third venue, even an extrapolated one, perhaps especially an extrapolated one, would seem to be an engine of literary power—at least to a writer like Dantec who is capable of same.

Ironically, *Babylon Babies*, the novel, written in French, and first translated and published by an obscure small press in the United States, probably would never have seen mass-market reprint

were that edition not a tie-in to an eminently forgettable action movie starring Vin Diesel, whose visage dominates the cover.

A film which, of course, threw out the interesting complexities of the best part of the novel to simplify it into a more or less generic action-adventure flick.

So goes the magic of Hollywood. A lousy simple-minded movie adaptation of a complex novel that flopped gets a novel written in French published by a major American house, and in the process breaks the writer's other work into English, too.

Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* is a career breakthrough, too. It has to be, being Bacigalupi's first novel after having made a reputation with short fiction as in days of yore. But what a first novel! What a novel, period!

Okay, I know of only one Thai SF writer, Somtow Sucharitkul, a Thai prince no less, according to himself. He is constrained by commercial demands to publish these days as S.P. Somtow, with the permission of the court astrologers, according to him. A very good SF writer, too, who lived for quite a while in Los Angeles, these days he is writing less and composing more back in Thailand, where he is the maestro of the national opera.

The point being that while Somtow is Thai, is now living back in Thailand, where he is, to say the least, well culturally connected these days, has written some excellent fiction, some of it but not very much partially set in Thailand, it is Bacigalupi, an American, who has written thus far what has to be not only the ultimate science fiction novel set in Thailand, but the ultimate Thai science fiction novel. These do not have to be the same thing, but in the case of *The Windup Girl* are.

The Windup Girl is about as thoroughly embedded in an extrapolated future Thai culture as it is possible to be.

This is a science fictional novel by all reasonable formal standards, but when a main viewpoint character is killed, he goes on as a ghost without explanation,

western-style justification, or excuse, because none are needed in this future Thai cultural and pop cultural milieu.

Emiko, the windup girl of the title, is an android of sorts, though the word never appears in the novel, with certain enhanced powers and certain deliberate limitations, designed as a courtesan for a high-level Japanese businessman, but abandoned by him, and in the present tense future, an S&M whore in a sleazy bordello in down and dirty Bangkok.

"Windup" because this is a future in which fossil fuels have been depleted to the point where they can only be afforded by top-level government officials, the military, and the very very rich, and everything else in the world economy, including Emiko, runs on kink-springs, power packs that have to be charged—that is wound-up—by muscle power, either human or that of megdonts, recreated mastodons of giant size, super elephants appropriate to the symbolic and mystical position of elephants in the Thai psyche.

Another of the viewpoint characters is a Vietnamese Chinese who was a captain of industry back in the home country, but had to flee when there was a murderous pogrom there against the local Chinese. He found refuge in Thailand, in Bangkok, where there is an exploited and down-trodden refugee community of same, and there he has found a job as flunky to Anderson Lake, boss of the AgriGen factory, which manufactures and charges springs.

AgriGen is a transnational also involved in the business of finding exotic new and possibly gene-engineered fruits and vegetables that do not carry the deadly plague infecting most of the world's food supply, and the novel opens with Lake snuffing through markets in search of same.

Another viewpoint character is the hero top cop heading the sector of the Bangkok police force in charge of keeping the food supply and the rest of the city and country free of plague contamination, and yet another his second in command.

And so on and so forth. The complex plots, schemes, double-crosses, political and economic machinations, low and high, that form the storylines of *The Windup Girl* take the reader through all levels of this masterfully created future Thai and particularly Bangkok society, consciousness, mystical and popular culture, with a level of both deep and detailed verisimilitude—on all levels, from palace intrigues to low-level dives, ex-pat and otherwise—that just about convinces you that only a Thai could have written it.

But you would be wrong.

The Windup Girl was written by an American.

I have been given to understand that Bacigalupi lived for a time in Thailand, though I have not been able to verify this, nor to learn for how long, or why, or on what level of immersion. But it doesn't seem to matter—the novel itself would seem to be proof that he not only lived in Thailand, but must have lived there not as an extended ex-pat daytripper, but somehow quite embedded in the culture on multiple levels.

Of course, I could be wrong. The closest novels to *The Windup Girl* written by an Anglophone outsider that I know of are *River of Gods* and *Brazyl*, both by Ian McDonald. And when I recently had occasion to speak with McDonald and opined that he must have spent a long time in India to have been able to write *River of Gods*, he told me: "Not really. I have an eidetic memory."

And proved it, or at least proved that whatever magic he had that allowed him to write *River of Gods* was more generally applicable, by doing the very same thing for *Brazyl*.

So it will be very interesting indeed to see what Paolo Bacigalupi does next. McDonald mined whatever research he had done to write *River of Gods* to produce a collection of short stories in the same setting—waste not want not, as it were.

Or not.

Because McDonald published that collection after he had written *Brazyl*.

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Will Paolo Bacigalupi do something similar or not? The temptation to keep setting his fiction in this future Thailand and surrounding Southeast Asian vicinity, at least at novel length, is certainly there; many SF writers, having done the work of creating such a "universe," have succumbed to it, even when the creation has been nowhere near as rich and deep and detailed as *The Windup Girl*. And the ending of the novel, while satisfying, does seem to be a set-up for a possible sequel, or might even serve as a set-up for a possible trilogy or open-ended series.

So the question is whether whatever gave this American novelist the power to write such a thoroughly Thai science fiction novel can, like whatever allowed Ian McDonald to write *River of Gods* and

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Brazyl, be generalized, can give him whatever it takes to repeat such a feat with another culture.

And whether or not it can be bottled for general use.

If so, I'd drink it. Wouldn't you?

Considering that something told me that I had to write *Russian Spring* in Paris, where most of it was set, and then to apply whatever I had subconsciously learned to the parts set in a future Soviet Union, considering that I went on to set novels in historic Mexico and a future Arabia during the Hadj, maybe I have already done so unknowingly.

It would seem that Ian McDonald has quaffed the potion as well.

Who knows, perhaps Paolo Bacigalupi has already, knowingly or not, downed the elixir, too. ☺

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

September is a bit slow (try CopperCon, Foolscap, or MadCon), so let's look ahead to the big fall schedule. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con five months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. —Erwin S. Strauss

SEPTEMBER 2010

3-6—DragonCon. For info, write: Box 16459, Atlanta GA 30321. Or phone: (770) 909-0115 (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). (Web) dragoncon.org. (E-mail) dragoncon@dragoncon.org. Con will be held in: Atlanta GA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Hyatt. Guests will include many. Huge con for "classic comics, low-brow pop art, designer toys, gaming."

2-6—Aussiecon 4. aussiecon4.org.au. Melbourne, Australia. World Science Fiction Con. A\$275+ at door—if you hurry.

3-6—GeekKon. geekkon.net. Marriott West, Madison WI. Ayres, Bodden. "Anime, sci-fi, gaming and all things geek."

4—LibrariCon. (910) 822-1998. cumberland.lib.nc.us. Held at HQ library, Fayetteville NC. K. Siemens, D. Hirajata, W. Hays.

4-6—CopperCon. casfs.org. Info@coppercon.org. Windermere Hotel, Mesa AZ. Stephen R. Donaldson, David Lee Summers.

10-12—Intervention. Intervention.com. Hilton, Rockville MD (near DC). DJ Subvert. Webcomics and other Internet folks.

16-20—Thin Air, 620-100 Arthur, Winnipeg MB R3B 1H3. (204) 927-7323. thinairwinnipeg.com. Int'l. writers' festival.

17-19—Horror Realm, Box 10400, Pittsburgh PA 15234. (412) 215-6317. horrorrealm.com. Crowne Plaza South Hotel.

24-26—Foolscap, Box 2461, Seattle WA 98111. foolscap.org. E. Bull, W. Shetterly, C. & C. Erich. Written SF & fantasy.

24-26—MadCon, Box 2601, Madison WI 53701. madcon2010.com. Harlan Ellison. General SF and fantasy convention.

24—Conference on Middle Earth, Box 428, Latham NY 12110. Thruway House, Albany NY. "Tolkien: His Works, His World."

OCTOBER 2010

1-3—ConJecture, Box 927388, San Diego CA 92192. 2010.conjecture.org. Town & Country. R. J. Sawyer. SF & fantasy.

1-3—VCon, Box 78069, Vancouver BC V5N 5W1. vcon.ca. Priest, Beveridge. "Steampunk—from Alchemy to Zeppelins."

1-3—WhedonFest. starrynightevents.com. Sheraton, Dixon Rd., Toronto ON. Acker, Brendon. Buffy, Angel, Firefly, etc.

7-10—Sirens, Box 149, Sedalia MO 65315. sirensconference.org. Vail CO. Terri Windling. "Women in Fantasy Literature."

8-10—AlbaCon. albacon.org. Alan Steele, Ron Miller, Lisa Ashton, others. SF and fantasy.

8-10—Motaku, 1746 N. McCoy, Independence MO 64050. (816) 863-0164. motaku.org. Park Place. C. Hodges. Anime.

15-17—Con*Stellation, Box 4857, Huntsville AL 35815. (256) 883-5922. con-stellation.org. Spencer, DiFale, S. Jackson.

15-17—ConVersion, Box 30314, Calgary AB T2H 2W1. con-version.org. General SF and fantasy convention.

15-17—Arcana, Box 8036, Minneapolis MN 55408. (612) 721-5959. arcana.com. St. Paul MN. "The Dark Fantastic."

19-28—CruiseTreK, 23852 PCH, #385, Malibu CA 90265. (310) 456-7544. cruisetrek.com. Iberian peninsula from Genoa.

22-24—NecronomiCon, c/o 5909 Thontosassa Rd., Plant City FL 33565. stonehill.org. St. Petersburg FL. David Gerrold.

22-24—CapClave, c/o Box 53, Ashton MD 20861. capclave.org. Hilton, Rockville MD (near DC). Willis, the Vandermeers.

28-31—World Fantasy Con, 3824 Patricia Dr., Upper Arlington OH 43220. wprldfantasy2010.com. Hyatt, Columbus OH.

29-31—HalCon. hal-con.com. Lord Nelson Hotel, Halifax NS. W. Koenig, D. Crosby, J. Bulloch, A. Douglas, M. Golden.

29-31—GayLaxiCon, 1206-44 Dunfield Ave., Toronto ON M4J 2H2. gaylaxicon2010.org. Montreal QC. For GLBT & friends.

29-31—HalloWhedon, 46 Campion, Great Linford, Milton Keynes MK14 5BH, UK. massiveevents.co.uk. Heathrow UK.

NOVEMBER 2010

5-7—BasCon, Box 282197, San Francisco CA 94128. bascon.org. Embassy Suites. S. San Francisco CA. Adult fan fiction.

12-14—Anime USA, Box 1073, Crofton MD 21114. animeusa.org. Arlington VA (near DC). Many guests. "Of, by, for otaku."

12-14—NovaCon, 379 Myrtle Rd., Sheffield S2 3HQ, UK. novacon.org. Park Inn, Nottingham UK. Banks. Long-time con.

12-14—Dimensions, 643 Longbridge Rd., Dagenham RM8 2DD, UK. tenthplanet.co.uk. Newcastle-on-Tyne UK. Dr. Who.

AUGUST 2011

17-21—RenoVation, Box 13278, Portland OR 97213. renovationsforg. Reno NV. Asher, Brown, Powers. WorldCon. \$160.

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